

THE SENTIENT CORRUPTION

The Sentient Trilogy: Book 3

IAN WILLIAMS

The Sentient Corruption

Ian Williams

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Prologue

Lost and found

Loose plaster crumbled and fell from the wall as the front door of their small farm house swung in at speed. It left a neat doorknob-sized dent in its wake as Elliot burst into the house and continued through to the lounge. His entrance was anything but welcomed by the early risers, each of who had only just sat down to start the day with a watery bowl of cereal.

All except for Jane - Graham's wife - were there.

"Elliot!" a heavily pregnant Ruth said bluntly to her wheezing husband. "Not all of us are morning people like you. Give us some time to wake up before you start crashing and bashing."

Out of breath and sweating profusely from his rushed journey home, Elliot could only nod to acknowledge his inconsiderate and overly loud entrance. The oafishness he had been endowed with at birth had gotten him in trouble before, but this time he had a good reason. He had a message to share that would soon get them all moving faster.

"I... I just..." he began to gasp for air now, the excitement had him ready to pass out.

The others all stopped mid mouthful, their spoons hovering inches from their mouths.

Ruth stood, placed her half-full bowl on the arm of the chair and took him to the side. She rested her hand against

his chest to calm his breathing. "Start slowly, what's up?" she asked.

A single swallow added extra emphasis to the serious tone of his coming news. By now everyone was ready to hear it, even if Elliot had not yet found the right words. He tried his best regardless; the right way was not worth the extra thinking time. "It's Phoenix."

He took another long breath.

"You've heard from my sister? Is she OK? Where is she?" The young-faced Sean almost dropped his own breakfast as he spoke.

"She's fine," Elliot paused to consider adding something else. "At least she was when she left the message. She's still somewhere in the city."

"Shit, is she trapped in that bubble thing?"

"I don't know."

"What did she tell you?"

Taking his wife at arm's length, Elliot stared into her eyes and said it without another wasted breath. "She's found G."

He knew dropping such news into a heavily pregnant woman's lap was never advisable. Unfortunately, he had neither the time to spare nor an eloquent enough grasp of the English language to break it to her gently. 'Head first' remained his preferred way of tackling a problem.

"No," a frail sounding voice said from the other end of the room.

Jane had entered from the kitchen, unnoticed and unseen by the others. Everyone turned to see a sickly white replace her usual healthy pink. She did not stay there for long, choosing instead to run for the backdoor and out into the crisp morning air.

Elliot went to chase after her when he was stopped by the smaller, but nonetheless unavoidable, figure of Ruth standing before him. She held him in place and unable to pass by.

"Where is he, Elliot. Where's my brother?" she said.

He thought over his reply for a second or two, then answered with a question of his own. "Do we have any digging equipment here, Sean?"

Sean returned a confused look. "There's probably a spade around here somewhere, why?"

"That won't do it." Elliot's attention had slipped as images of industrial sized equipment came to mind. The biggest and most powerful boy's toys floated about his mind's-eye like a mobile hanging above a baby's bed. He began to salivate at the thought of getting to use something so awesome to save his best friend. Then the reality of the situation hit him; where could he possibly find that sort of tech?

"Any chance you could tell us what you're talking about?" Sean insisted.

Elliot snapped out of his quickly-building fantasy of saving the day and focused once more. "Graham's buried at Sanctuary."

The questions soon began again in earnest after that.

* * *

Sitting atop a small grassy ridge, raised up to see at a distance, Elliot surveyed his night-time surroundings. From his vantage point he could see right across the remains of the farming tower that had once stood proudly over a hidden realm. Now - and as he had seen it the last time he visited - it sat broken, and only slightly suggesting anything other than ruins had ever resided there.

Whether the place was still guarded by an unknown team of mercenaries had played on his mind all throughout his journey here. Before, he and Phoenix had encountered them head on, and had defeated one of them too after a quick struggle. He hoped the guards had since moved on,

something he found to be incorrect the moment he and Sean arrived. To get what they wanted they were going to have to again face them.

Or at least that would have been the case if not for the hired help the two were waiting on.

September had yet to wave goodbye for another year. Still, the air now carried the hint of coming cold snaps. His best estimate of the wait for the wintery drizzles was another week or two. Until then he would be glad for a prolonged dry period. That way his current task could proceed unaffected by adverse weather.

Both were prepared for a long night, with warm clothes and enough snacks to get them through without a single drop in blood sugar levels. Sean had padded out a little more than necessary before leaving and now looked prepared for a blizzard. Elliot, on the other hand, made do with his preferred level of dress; namely a thin jumper over a thin t-shirt and a soft beanie to keep his skinhead warm. His bulky presence required less material overall to keep itself warm.

Out to the side of him, and a good few miles away, a dull purple gloom hung above the distant cityscape. The force-field, now covering the city like a semi-transparent umbrella, no longer allowed the nights to fully form this close. Instead they were ever so slightly tinted. The sight of it gave Elliot a chill, the kind that the ambient temperature would struggle to replicate.

Raising his small binoculars to his eyes, Elliot took another look around. Scanning the brightly lit area a hundred or so metres ahead of them, he could once again make out all that told of what had been there before. Sections of metal girder stuck out of the concrete floor as if the destroyed skeleton of Sanctuary had been reanimated and had tried to climb itself out of the ground. The rest of the farming towers' structure had long ago been removed.

He had been in almost exactly the same position only days before with Phoenix, Sean's missing sister. Her recorded message had brought them back to this place, this time to save a friend rather than simply follow a trail. Things had changed so quickly, and now she could no longer be reached.

Feeling the onset of Deja-vu caused him a sudden jolt of nerves. Every time their situation had been altered by another unexpected revelation, someone else had been claimed. They could not risk losing anyone else, not when their numbers were beginning to dwindle.

"Hey, anything yet?" Sean asked.

The question stirred Elliot back to the present vista that he was idly staring at through small lenses. Sean had obviously noticed that the search had stalled. The binoculars had not moved an inch for a while. In any event, the perimeter appeared clear for now. The last patrol had passed by over ten minutes ago, and apart from a pause to check the darkness that he and Sean now hid within, the guy had not stopped.

Elliot lowered his binoculars to the grassy mound he lay upon and addressed his spying companion. "They're not here yet," he said. "You sure they're coming?"

The voicing of doubt appeared to anger Sean slightly, as if his own reputation depended on the hired help turning up. He tutted, as if to say 'I said they would be, so they will'.

"I'm just saying, we don't know anything about these guys. They might have decided not to come," Elliot added.

"Just wait. These are exactly the kind of people we need for this."

"But can they be trusted?"

Another tut from Sean. "Listen," he began to say as he took the binoculars for himself. "When me, Phoenix and Dillon worked for that Anthony prick these were the type of people he had us find. They didn't grow up in a city like you - and pretty much everyone else. They started out here.

Some of them will probably be assholes. But money is money, and to get some, these guys won't second-guess the one that's paying."

"I get it. We city people are lucky to have had such a good start in life. That doesn't mean we're all afraid of getting stuck in."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then go down there and deal with those guards yourself."

Elliot thought it over and then rejected it a moment later; his pride would have to take a hit on this one, he realised. They were not there to fight, that was part one of the hired help's job - if they decided to show.

The two became silent again, as they generally both preferred that whilst in each other's company. Sean had become a useful member of Elliot's little group over the course of a year-and-a-half, and yet neither cared for each other's personality, which sat at opposing ends of that particular spectrum. Their pasts were too different, and both struggled to understand the other's perspective on life.

When it came to protecting their own, however, they were very much in agreement; actions were worth more than any amount of words. This shared ideal was all that made their time together even remotely bearable.

Sean raised himself up an inch or two to see further. His sudden movement warned of another approaching patrol. They had observed the same guard wander by at least three times now. Each time he appeared again, Elliot became sure that no-one was coming to help. He was dealing with criminals for nothing.

The time had come to call it a night.

Elliot said, "We've got a long walk back to the car, Sean, we should get going."

"You seriously giving up that soon?" Sean said, still raised.

"I'm not giving up. I'm just facing facts; they aren't coming." Elliot stood, brushed himself down, then turned away. At which point he heard a whistle. Whoever it was they were announcing their arrival like a chirping bird. Elliot then realised the message had not been one intended for him and Sean, but for someone else.

"Get down," Sean ordered, dragging his companion into the dirt. "Look, the guard."

The unexpected noise had caught the patrolling guard's attention, drawing him into the dark. Then, once far enough off his own path, he tripped. Only he did not return to his feet a second or two later. Instead a ghostly figure in black stood and began to circle around the rear of the lit perimeter. The person stuck stealthily to the night, never allowing the light to touch him.

Help had finally arrived.

"Is that our friends?" Elliot asked.

Sean laughed. "Told ya they'd come."

The hidden man disappeared from view shortly after dealing with the loose patrol. But he was far from alone. Two more walked casually from the veil of night and into the middle of the area. They were not at all concerned with being seen.

"Sean, what are they doing?"

"They're clearing the place out."

Once by a man-sized hole in the concrete - the same hole Elliot had lowered Phoenix through only days before - the two men stopped. One knelt and peered down the hole, while the other began digging around in a backpack on his friend's shoulders. Now convinced that the top level was free of more guards, the first team member reappeared and joined the other two. They were not messing around.

"Do they know there're more guards below?" Elliot said.

Sean simply shushed him.

There already appeared a plan in place to deal with the remaining security hidden below ground. Not only had the first man taken care of the single patrol, he had also robbed his unconscious - or dead - victim of his radio too. His short message was simple and one Elliot could easily decipher by lip reading alone: "Help!"

A blast of fevered exclamations and demands from the radio for more details made the three standing by the hole share a nod. Their process eluded Elliot right up to the point when the man searching the backpack finished. He then produced a blinking device made of two metal tubes taped crudely together. It had to be a bomb.

"Are they nuts?"

"Chill, Elliot, they know what they're doing."

Without the least bit of concern for the chaos they were about to unleash upon those poor souls rushing toward their doom, the last in the trio to wander away from the hole held out the device and released it. The blinking device fell through the ground and descended into the underworld, its distance marked by the lessening of the clicking sound coming from it.

Elliot ducked down below his grassy mound hiding place and waited for the coming explosion. It did not disappoint either. The earth shook beneath him as the shockwave passed by. When he turned back, it was the rising cloud of smoke that really told him of the damage inflicted below.

There was nothing left to hide from any longer. Sean was first to leave the safety of darkness. He raced over to the three rough looking men, his face beaming with excitement and ready to tell them so. Elliot could not bring himself to feel anything but slightly nauseated. He followed behind Sean soon enough, although not before he had composed himself first.

"You the one in charge?" the, up to then, silent assassin asked. His friends stayed a few feet behind their leader.

Looking the thin faced man over, Elliot considered his options for a moment. He was out of his depth, and he knew it. *Best sound confident*, he thought. "That's me."

"Awesome." The man nodded to his hooded friends, who took his point and walked away. "You helping or just watching?"

"I guess we're helping."

"Then get your ass to the front gate and let the others in."

"The others?" Elliot asked with a scrunched up face.

"Yeah, the others. You want this thing dug up quickly or not?"

"Sure."

"Then move it or lose it, buddy. We ain't got all night. Once the equipment's set up we can start this treasure hunt of yours."

Sean led the way, walking a few feet ahead of Elliot; the reluctant follower. These people were certainly fast workers. Elliot just hoped they would be able to find Graham and dig him up just as quickly too. Of course he would probably need to tell them exactly what they were trying to find before they got started. He had yet to mention that the treasure was expected to be an adult human.

* * *

Mid-afternoon passed by in a blur of kicked-up dirt and dust, and an occasional shout of excitement from one of the hired-hands brought in to dig. So far each time someone thought they had found something it turned out to be a false alarm. Each false start cost precious time after the diesel powered digger was forced to halt its monster sized bucket hauls of earth, only to be restarted seconds later.

Where was Graham buried? Phoenix's recorded message had been light on details and heavy on emotion. Now Elliot,

Sean and their band of diggers faced an uphill struggle to locate and retrieve him from beneath the Earth. Feelings alone did not amount to results, despite the high levels of both anticipation and worry racing around Elliot's mind. And with each failed attempt to locate the hidden prize, those feelings only worsened in intensity.

He sat upon the dry ground, rubbing his hands together to encourage the dirt off of his skin. He had not shied away from the hard work and had been beside the others throughout most of the night, digging test holes to find Graham's tomb to no avail. Success was overdue and sorely needed too; they were unsure the area would remain only theirs for the entire day.

"Any luck?" Elliot asked Sean, who returned after yet another mistaken breakthrough.

"Nope," he replied before slapping himself down to the floor beside. "You sure she said he would be here?"

"She said he was buried somewhere beneath Sanctuary. He must have survived the cave in somehow."

"Even though that isn't remotely possible?"

No reply came to mind. Elliot instead answered with a frustrated clawing of the loose ground. His fingers pushed the dirt aside to create small ridges between his digits. He stared down at the pattern they left behind. Something stirred at the back of his brain. There, in an area normally reserved only for emergencies in his case, an idea had begun to form. When it hit him he jumped up and left Sean behind.

"Hey, you," he called to the check-shirted woman operating the diesel digger. He had to shout a couple of times before she heard him. As soon as she did she leant over and switched off the hulking machine. "Dig over there, over there." He waved his hands frantically to the area he wanted her to move to.

"What?" Sean said from behind.

Elliot spun around to speak. "When we escaped from Sanctuary we took the tunnel, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Look." He pointed to a long section of ground, sunken by a few feet and making a zig-zag path away from the remains of the farming tower. Like cracks in ice it separated and forked off in a seemingly random way. Elliot had realised that was not the case at all. They followed a path after all.

"What am I looking at?" Sean said, surprised by the sudden change in Elliot's demeanour.

"The tunnel we took caved in. The ground sinks in places where it runs, all the way to the exit. That's why the ground's dropped; because the earth beneath fell into the tunnel. That's where Graham has to be!"

* * *

The digger moaned as the weight of its full load worked against the machinery. Bucket after bucket of earth had been removed along the weaving path of the tunnel that once ran beneath. As that was taken away, one large grave-sized pile after another, the rest of them attacked the ground with pickaxes and shovels. Lack of technology was nothing to these people, they could make do with good old fashioned hard work instead.

After an hour or so of sweaty and intense digging the first breakthrough was reached. One of the hired helpers broke through to a tomb-like room below their feet. His test hole made it down to the tunnel - at least twice his own height below them all. He called out to announce his find like he had discovered a handful of diamonds.

Elliot rushed over to see the results for himself. "What have you found?"

The man began to raise himself to his feet, his face saying all it needed to.

Looking down into the small hole, Elliot saw a shining light coming back at him. Something down there had come to life. It called to them to reach it; a flickering beacon of hope for those who had almost lost all.

Without thinking he grabbed the nearest pickaxe and thrust it into the ground. Each strike cemented his resolve, compounding his stubbornness to find his lost friend. Swinging it was easy. Breaking through the earth was much less so. Yet he continued regardless.

The others could only watch as Elliot desperately worked.

“Give me room, stand back,” he ordered of anyone in his way.

“Hey, grab a shovel. We’ve got digging to do,” Sean added. He too took up a tool and joined in.

Between them they made it through the last layer of dirt in one unrelenting battle against the earth, which lasted all of ten-minutes. They wielded shovels instead of blades, yet the fight was no less valiant. Victory came in the form of a hole large enough for Elliot to slide through. He did so the instant it was big enough.

Inside, he landed on top of a solid rock of nearly clear material. Its transparency allowed him to see it contained something, like a giant crystal egg.

“I need a torch. Someone pass one down.”

On his command one was offered to him. Switching it on and shining it down to his own feet revealed the treasure within the rock he stood upon. A human form, which appeared to float in the centre of the object like it had been immersed in fluid before hardening. It had to be Graham.

The torch fell from Elliot’s sweaty grip and bounced off of the hard shell under his feet. No strength remained in his body to hold it, or himself in place for that matter too. He

dropped to his knees and ran his hands along the smooth surface, tracing the outline of his missing friend.

He then spoke in an uncharacteristically soft tone, so only he and his frozen buddy could possibly hear: "I've found you, G, I've fucking found you!"

Chapter 1

Rise and shine

Daylight.

Beep, beep, beep, beep.

Someone was speaking outside the room, their voice seeping through the doorframe.

Beep, beep.

The conversation soon ended. Through the frosted glass window looking out into the hallway, the two blurry shadows then parted ways and left in separate directions.

Beep. A high tone again called out, and it was happening at regular intervals, one for every few seconds that passed. Although noticing the pattern had made it slow a little. It reacted to the decreasing level of anxiety in Graham's body. At the first breaking of light into his field of vision it had been much higher – and the beeping much faster too – now it was under control.

His heart was beating, his pulse steady and strong. He could feel it working away beneath his chest plate. The blood flowing through his veins once again carried the oxygen his brain so dearly required. His body was whole, was again under his command.

Only after realising all of these human processes were happening as they were supposed to did he remember to breathe out again. He was human, that much could be seen

and felt. It was not another approximation, like the one he had been trapped in before. This was very much reality.

He had made it out after all.

The Sentient world now resembled nothing more than a terrible nightmare. Yet he could not fully dismiss it as such. Far too much had occurred inside that place. A race of beings, he previously denied truly existed, had imprinted the opposite opinion onto him. They had taught him the error of his ways.

But in doing so they had also infected his mind with a worrying notion; which reality, if any, was more real? Inside the Sentient world he may have forgotten how his body felt, or the way his heart worked like a ticking clock beneath his ribs, or even the sound of a beeping life-support system. Still, it had seemed just as real as the one he was finally returning to.

An almost irresistible urge to scream at the top of his lungs or jump for joy nearly overwhelmed him. After a moment to deliberate on which felt the most appropriate, he then went with an involuntary third option and giggled uncontrollably. To stifle the increasing intensity of his almost maniacal laughter, he turned onto his side in the soft bed he lay upon and began chewing his pillow. His sudden outpouring of emotion only worsened the more he tried to hold it back.

It did not matter which world was more real, it only mattered that he had finally awoken to his own. And he was ecstatic about that.

Sunlight streamed in through the blinds to his side. He failed to notice it until he caught the heat on his damp face. The room was far too stuffy, like it had not been vented for clean air in days. Despite the satisfaction he felt with each and every breath he took - a defiant reclaiming of his humanity in itself - he could still tell the air quality was poor.

Where was his family? He expected to see their concerned faces leaning over him. He had followed Luke's instructions. Leaving the Sentient world far behind should have been followed by a reunion. For some reason they were not there to greet him. In fact, no-one was, not even a doctor.

Getting out of bed was to be a lonely experience then, and one he felt oddly confused about. His return to his own world was meant to be an exciting experience, filled with tears of joy and tight embraces to squeeze the air out of his chest. Not one spent alone and wondering where everyone was. Had something gone wrong, or was he simply panicking over nothing?

Luke had explained to him exactly how the process was expected to work. It made perfect sense at the time too. He and Luke snuck out of the prison maze - still something Graham could barely believe had been of his making - and travelled deep into a hidden layer of the Sentient world. It was like a secret vault that stored only the most precious items. In this case a passageway between worlds. Walking through a swirling portal, with his eyes clamped shut for fear of blinding himself, he had re-entered his human mind as if it were a file being downloaded.

That was the last memory he had of his traumatic out-of-body experience.

He needed to speak to someone, if only to hear a real voice once again. The words bouncing around his newly regained consciousness had never passed through his ears, they had taken a shortcut and gone straight to the top level. Only the irrefutable sound of a human voice could please him now; he needed to share his almost unbridled feelings of joy with someone, anyone, another voice to scream at the sky with his own, like wolves calling to the pack. He had returned, and now he would see to reclaiming his life.

At least he planned to once his disturbed laughter stopped.

Sitting up, he fought against the weakness and continued to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. They throbbed as the blood ventured down to his toes, and ached like he had run a marathon in his sleep. It surprised him to feel this way. Peering down at his legs, he was again at odds with what he saw. His legs were much thinner than he remembered them being. For a few seconds he could not confidently say they were even his. Only when he recognised the mole above his right ankle did he fully believe. These were his legs, but they were much skinnier than before.

His bony toes made contact with the cold, vinyl floor and immediately recoiled. After taking a few seconds to adjust to the temperature difference, he then planted his feet fully on the ground – even though the tendons fought against him. The cold was certainly one thing he had not missed while in the other world. In there, it had only managed a rough sensation.

He followed the path up his legs and to his torso before settling on his right hand. *What happened here?* he thought, lifting it free of his weight and holding it out in front of him. His hand had been wrapped in bandages to cover an injury he had no recollection of ever having sustained. Whoever tended to the mystery wound had made sure the bandages were tight too, far more so than he would have preferred.

The questions were amassing at a pace.

While he shook the numbness from his fingers, he studied his surroundings in more detail to find a hint of his current location. And from the look of his highly sanitised room and the whiter-than-white bed sheets, he knew he was in some form of hospital. The question was, which one? It did not look to be one he had been to before. For starters, the room barely reached much further than a modestly sized broom cupboard.

And then there was the equipment beside his bed; not quite modern. A thin wire snaked its way from underneath his hospital issued blue shirt and across his bed to the archaic looking heart rate monitor beside it. Nothing needed wires anymore. The technology keeping track of his internals came straight out of a history textbook.

Before his trip into another land he had been lucky enough to be surrounded by the greatest, and easiest to use, technology any human could ever hope to have at their disposal. That everyone had the same access made the marvel that was the Simova system no less impressive.

It made life easy, never letting his needs go unfulfilled. When he woke up in the morning it knew to put the kettle on and to serve a drink at the desired temperature. It correctly predicted when he fancied Jam on toast or just butter. It even had his emails already filtered in order of his reading preferences. All of this it achieved without wires; the shackles of the automated and predictive technological age he grew up in.

The strap he pulled from around his chest and tossed to the floor was like a Penny farthing compared to the Ferrari his level of technology represented. He began to wonder if he had somehow been taken back in time and was now a lone time traveller destined to live out his life in the past.

“Bullshit!” he said to the *dinging* alarm that replaced the heart rate monitor’s beeping of before. The stupid thing was angry at him for unplugging it.

The all-seeing, ever present Simova system simply picked up your pulse from the many cameras that inevitably caught you, something about scanning the tiny veins in a person’s neck as they walked by. In truth he never really cared how it did what it did, only that it did it without fail. At least it had when he last walked the city streets. How much had changed while he was away?

Have I really become that reliant on technology? he had to ask himself as he found the strength to stand and

approach the window. Maybe seeing his beloved city again would ease his troubled mind?

Pulling the cord, he raised the blinds to see out – and again he became annoyed by the missing automation. It did not get any better when he peered out across what he thought would be a sprawling metropolis beyond, and saw nothing of the sort. Hospitals within the New Chelmsford City limits were multiple stories high and even *they* struggled to compete with the surrounding buildings. None of them were ground level and single floor like the one he had awoken in.

The only conclusion he could come to as he watched a busy square filled with white tents and a bustling population crowding around them, was that he no longer resided within his home city. From the look of the two floor housing and broken window shop fronts that encompassed these marquee-style temporary structures, he was even further afield than his burial at Sanctuary.

He had to investigate. There was not a single reason he could think of for making such an unnecessary trip out into the middle of nowhere. And where had all these people come from? His understanding of the out-of-city areas was that most were left abandoned. They were relics from the not-so-distant past.

Simova's changes to the country had come at a cost, one most were willing to pay without question; total abandonment of the rural areas for favour of the new style cities of the future. They had seen the prospect of rolling out their automated services to every part of the country as unfeasible – or too expensive. So it was understood by the population that if they wanted to remain relevant members of society they would have to move into their nearest city. To put it bluntly, there were far more people wandering around outside his window than there should have been.

Enough was enough. He needed answers.

A search of the room for any form of ordinary clothing bore no fruit. He would have to leave dressed in his paper-thin patient garb instead. Not ideal, but by no means out of the question. His want for understanding superseded any overbearing pride he might have had. So, never one to worry about style or the latest fashion, he pulled up his loose trousers and headed for the door.

Cracking it open far enough to peek out, he spied the hallway that passed his room. People were rushing about outside, no doubt on their way to other patients, and generally clogging up the route like heavy Mag-Lev traffic on a Friday night. As one white coat flashed by, giving him a fright in the process, he pulled the door shut before trying again. This time he took a step over the threshold and into the hallway. He would explore at his own pace, one footfall at a time.

The first thing he realised as he studied the place was just how old everything looked. At least inside his room it appeared clean. The same standard of cleanliness had not been reached in this area. But someone had tried. He could see the scrub marks running along the walls, as though someone had given up after the first few layers of muck. Slowly he could begin to see what was going on. This place had been brought back to working order, and in some form of a hurry too.

A few rooms down the hall from his own, he found an open door into another patient's room. Inside, a woman of advanced years lay still in a bed, tubes exiting her mouth and running to yet more old-age equipment. The medical staff here were making do with whatever they had been able to find when they moved in - which explained the lack of modern tech.

He had not been transported back in time after all. Instead, the place he found himself in had been frozen in time by circumstances out of its control. Something terrible

had to have happened for so many people to flee the city at once.

For a moment he could not take his eyes off the sleeping figure. She looked so frail, so helpless; he saw some similarity in his own situation. For so long he had been separated from his family and unable to reach them, even see them. As with the woman in the bed, if they had been right there next to him at the ruins of Sanctuary, he would never have known it.

Turning to leave, he spotted a men's dressing gown hanging from the end of the bed in the room opposite. He objected to taking what was not his, so he decided to borrow it for an indefinite period of time instead. It barely fit, but still, it covered enough to prevent anything slipping out of his ill-fitting clothes.

No-one questioned him as he shuffled out to the unmanned nurse's station and had to steady himself against it. Too much was going on around for him to stand out. Even when he became distracted by the gaunt looking reflection staring right back at him from the window of the nearest room, with an almost angry scowl, he was ignored.

He blew out his cheeks a little to check it was in fact him looking back. His skin dipped around the mouth like he permanently sucked on a boiled sweet, and a grubby looking beard almost entirely covered his face. Had he lost weight while inside the Sentient world? That seemed unlikely to him. Eighteen months trapped in that place would have left him dead if during that time his body still continued to operate as normal.

With the staff still ignoring his presence, it made it easier to enact his escape without causing trouble. The electronic double-doors had long ago broken - or been smashed in. So it was a straight path out into the forecourt of the facility. In a decisive show of strength, he pushed himself toward the doors and allowed his feet just enough time to catch up with

the rest of him. He found himself immediately regretting his decision to leave almost the second he set off.

Outside it had taken on a much more chaotic and scrambling atmosphere as people pushed him aside and stared suspiciously. They all displayed desperation in their eyes, like they knew of a coming darkness and were fearful of it.

White tents were arranged in a grid pattern, roughly twelve tents deep, in front of the small medical building. Each were around ten-foot-tall and square in shape. Their material doors, both front and back, had been rolled up and pinned in place to allow people a path through. Inside they were large enough for a four-foot table to sit either side of the moving line of people.

Graham followed a couple into the nearest tent to investigate. Upon the tables were ready made packs of supplies. They included everything from Army issued canned foods to antibiotic Medi-pens for emergency administration only.

Without thinking, he copied those in front of him and took one for himself, sliding the bag's strap over his shoulder before moving on. Once he emerged out of the other end of the first tent, he stepped out of the unstoppable flow of patiently queuing people, found a space to stand, and took a moment to take stock.

A man from one of the tents behind suddenly called out above the moving crowd. "Please don't push, there's enough for everyone," he said.

Graham turned to see and faced yet another line of people moving along the row behind him. Those that already had a supply pack carried on to the next tent for whatever was being handed out there, while the rest tried to fight against the current to get one for themselves. It was every man for himself.

Some had made the mistake of bringing their children onto the battlefield and were paying for it now; the cries of

young ones caught in the middle permeated the air like needles in Graham's ears.

He had to get out of the madness and find somewhere he could think clearly. Going back the way he came was out of the question, so he cut a path across the rows until he reached one of the derelict shop-fronts at the perimeter.

There he sat on the window display, after checking for loose glass first. *Probably the first time you've been used in a while*, he thought of the disused store behind him. It appeared to have survived better than most of the buildings here; it still had its roof intact at least. Seeing just how much the rural areas had fallen apart in the twenty-or-so years since they were abandoned was a depressing sight.

Another tent had now run out of supplies, this time a tent handing out bottles of water. The woman running it shouted at the top of her voice to the others nearby. "Tent number 7 is out of 10 litre bottles, tent 7 out of 10 litre bottles," she said.

That voice! Graham recognised it straight away. It was his sister Ruth, doing her usual and lending a hand. It did not surprise him to see her doing this, he knew she was never one to shy away from a challenge. Finding her amid such a crazy crowd made total sense to him. She would not take any shit from anyone. So who better to keep the grabbing hands at bay?

Forgetting his bag of supplies altogether, he left his shop-front seat and slowly wandered over. By the time he remembered, it was already too late; someone had assumed it unwanted and swiped it in a flash. He did not really need it, but still, such an affront had angered him internally. On second consideration, getting more supplies appeared the easiest way of reaching Ruth without having to cut in line anyway.

This time as he shuffled along behind another family he kept his eyes locked on target. Finally, he had some idea of what was going on. His family had not dumped him in this

museum-peace of a town after all, they were there too. Somewhere. He was nearing his sister slowly but surely. He would get his reunion after all, just as he had been hoping.

At no more than two metres away from his sister he tried to shout her name. For some reason he could not even manage to do it. Something had clicked inside his brain, pausing him in place.

A deep throbbing began to appear behind his eyes, somewhere entirely out of his reach. He found himself unable to control his blinking any longer. However much he wanted to try, he could do absolutely nothing about the sudden pain, like that of a blistering hot poker through his skull. Grabbing at the sides of his head only angered him more as his hands failed to make contact with the affected area inside his brain. His body began to shake violently, threatening to break his balance completely.

Instead of calling to his sister, Graham soon found himself desperately wanting to scream in pain. The faces that had stopped to stare quickly blurred as sweat gushed from his brows. He had never felt such severe discomfort before. Not even the piece of wood that had stuck in his side during his ordeal at Sanctuary had hurt this bad. Despite the immensely powerful sensations he was feeling, he still noted the lack of any sign of this previous injury. Had he healed while inside the Sentient world too?

Please, God, stop this now! he repeated over and over in his own head as the pain pulled his arms into his chest.

Then, in the blink of an eye, his sister vanished from sight. Everything had gone along with her too, even the pain. Only a shadowy outline of something a few metres in front of him was visible. His eyes squinted in the darkness to see what it could be. He was back to normal again, as if the incident had never happened at all. But where was he now?

"Hey, sir, can you hear me?" someone asked directly behind him. "I said, do you need help?"

He angled his aching head to the side, bringing the man talking to him into his peripheral vision. Making out the bright white of a doctor's jacket brought him some relief. He was back in the hospital. Confusion kept him staring into the dark room. How did he get there so suddenly?

"How about we go back to your room, would you like that?"

Graham was too busy trying to hold back a flood of emotion to pick up on the doctor's tone. He could not understand what had brought him there. Had he blacked out? Telling himself not to worry did nothing to help.

Such a strange event, and yet he had experienced something like it before. Only that time it had not been accompanied by the feeling of someone digging around inside his head with a tiny pickaxe. In the Sentient world the scenes had simply changed.

"No, no, no, no," Graham said, turning on the spot and almost falling from the dizziness it caused him. "Where am I?"

The doctor dipped his head to see Graham's eyes clearly, all too obviously checking his patient's pupils too, while he was at it. "You're in the hospital basement. Do you remember how you got here?"

The basement? Hearing the doctor say it only partially alleviated his concern. For a brief moment he had the heart-breaking suspicion he was still within the Sentient world. In there he had faced regular switches of scenery, always in the same blink of an eye too.

He told himself this was not the case with his latest situation. He could remember, with crystal clear clarity, his escape. No, this was still the real world. So what had happened?

"I... I can't think straight," he said, looking behind himself.

The light coming in from the open door at the top of a narrow staircase to the side of him was enough to highlight

the immediate vicinity. He stood upon a dirty concrete floor that had large cracks in some places, where small tufts of grass had managed to grow - as much as the lack of light allowed, at least.

But at the end of the unlit space, he could just about make out a collection of metal chairs, a janitor's style cleaning bucket and a plastic mop, all covered by a thin coating of moss. No-one had used the basement for a long time, which made his reason for being there even more of a mystery.

"Come on, let's get you back upstairs, shall we?" the doctor asked gently.

"What else is down here?"

"Nothing, just you."

Graham's blacking out theory was starting to fit the bill perfectly. "What's behind the chairs, over there?"

The doctor sighed as he looked his mystery patient over a couple of times. After a second or two he decided to humour Graham, if only to keep him calm. "Erm, well, I guess that must have been the back-up generator. But this place has been out of use for a long time, so it almost certainly doesn't work anymore. We're using power generators the Army has provided, that's what's powering the building now."

Thinking this over for a moment, Graham eventually conceded; there was no fight left in him to face anything else. He had only just made it out of an almost inescapable prison, what had felt like an utterly hopeless situation at the time. All he wanted now was to see his family again. Being so close earlier only made the need that much more urgent.

"My name's Graham," he said as though he was not even certain about this anymore.

"Good, good," the doctor replied. "OK, Graham. Can you tell me which room you left to come here?"

Graham shook his head. He had never considered checking his room number when he took a walk outside.

For all he knew this was not even the same building.

Taking his arm gently, the doctor began to lead him toward the stairs. "Don't worry, Graham, we'll get you safely back there."

They took a short but slow trip through the ground floor and were soon back to the nurse's station. Graham recognised it immediately. From there he was then able to lead the rest of the way. His room had been halfway down the corridor, somewhere on the left. When he spotted the room he had sneaked the dressing gown out of before, he knew it was but a few doors away.

His arrival back at his own room was not announced by him or the doctor, it was by the raised voices inside his room. A heated discussion had broken out among the occupants and it showed no sign of stopping. Through the frosted glass he could see three people and one smaller one, all standing close together. Spotting the black-haired, four-foot-high figure nearly broke him in two; it had to be his precious little daughter, Alex.

"How can he up and disappear like that, and no-one sees him do it?" a woman said.

Recognising Jane's voice, he felt himself begin to choke up. Could he even hold it together? He was seeing them for the first time in, what Luke had told him before his escape back to the real world, was around eighteen months.

"Jane, please, calm down," Graham's sister Ruth said.

Graham stood with the door handle in his left hand, ready to open it. If not for the growing suspicion that it was still all a trick of some kind, he would have forced the door in already and faced them. As it was, he deliberated over whether to find out for sure or turn and run again. He looked to his white coated companion beside him for support.

"Go ahead, your family is waiting," the doctor said in response.

A deep breath out, then Graham was ready. He twisted the knob and began to push the door open. It was at this point that Jane spoke again.

"I can't go through this again, I can't," she said, freezing suddenly as Graham stepped in.

Stopping in the doorway, the door swinging in the rest of the way by itself, he stared his wife in the eyes. She had been sobbing, but ceased the second he appeared. In turn he could not move; the shock had him in a state of denial.

He had last faced such a strong feeling while talking to another version of Stephen within the other world. Was what he now saw really happening, just as that had?

"Holy shit!" Elliot exclaimed. "Buddy, you're actually awake."

"Daddy." Alex raced forward. She made the short distance to Graham in no time at all and showed no sign of slowing, instead careening into him, her arms trying their best to engulf him in one go. Their time apart had been just as difficult for her to stand, now they were together once more.

But Graham could not fully enjoy the moment. In all of his many fantasies about this very moment, in not one of them did he imagine he would struggle to truly believe it. He held his hands hovering an inch or two above his daughter's shoulders, still not quite willing to trust any of it. They stayed together for a few silent moments while Graham considered how to feel in return.

"Graham?" Jane said. She was too nervous to approach. From her static position she reached out to him.

He would have to make the first move. He had to prove he really was there too.

He soon gave in to the urge to find out once and for all and reached for his wife. "Come here," he said, pulling Jane right into the middle of his and Alex's embrace. The three of them squeezed each other to within an inch of their lives, without a single concern for doing so.

The family had been reunited finally. His two favourite people in his arms again, he revealed his immense relief with a trembling lip and a look to the ceiling to hold in the moisture forming behind his eyes. After so much time apart, he now had what he missed so dearly. Only then did he fully believe he had made it home again.

Ruth and Elliot held each other too. For a brief moment they all enjoyed the quiet, not realising someone was still watching.

"I can see this is a delicate time for you all," the doctor said, taking a backward step through the door, "so I'll come back in a little while to see how you're getting on."

Jane suddenly pulled away from Graham and addressed the doctor before he could leave. "Wait, please," she asked through a loud sniffle. "Where did you find him?"

"He was in the basement, must have wandered down there by mistake."

"It's OK," Graham interrupted. "I just lost my way, that's all."

He noticed, with disapproval, the look the doctor sent to Jane just before leaving. He did not appreciate the message it was clearly loaded with either. The nod suggested more to the story, that the subject would require some tact to talk about. Sure, he had blacked out suddenly and had possibly lost some time because of it too - through the window he could see if was now night - but that did not mean there was something wrong with him. In his mind at least, that seemed right.

"I'll be back in a little while to run some tests, just as a precaution." The doctor had added the last bit as an afterthought, before he left the room. He had decided to tread lightly around the subject; God forbid they should confuse the patient even more.

"What happened, G? Why'd you go to the basement?" Elliot asked.

He had nothing to say in reply, only a shrug could fit the job. He had walked from outside, back into the hospital and down into the basement without any memory of doing so. To him it had been automatic, like he was led by some form of autopilot. Telling them this would only add to their worries, so he decided to keep it to himself for now. *Unless the doctor lets it slip*, he considered with a grimace.

"What's the matter, are you in pain?" Jane said in reaction to his change of expression.

"No, I'm fine."

She ignored his answer entirely and began to lead him. Despite his reluctance to move - and Alex's refusal to let him go - Jane continued to push until he could go nowhere but the bed. Unsure of whether he would be able to manage by himself, she did not even hesitate in helping him turn and lower him into a seated position.

"Please, Jane, I'm OK," he said, not quite complaining, but close.

"Sorry." She sat beside him and pulled his hand into her lap, where she held it tightly, afraid of letting it go again.

After a long time without a single word spoken, Elliot chose to break it up. The silence had become one filled with anticipation. There were questions hanging over Graham, ones he was not particularly looking forward to answering. Again, during his own version of this overdue moment, there were differences. In them he always skipped ahead of the awkward conversation, one that was about to begin whether he was ready or not.

"What happened to you back at Sanctuary?" Elliot said. He grabbed a seat from the edge of the room and slid it into place right in front of Graham and Jane. Alex hung back and placed her crossed arms on the back of the chair. She rested her head upon them and stared at her father with her big round eyes wider than ever.

It had happened quicker than expected, Graham was stuck before a single word could leave his mouth. Just the

thought of the place that he was having to force himself to remember made his lips twitch and his teeth clench. They had to know everything he saw, and they needed to know now, regardless of his discomfort with doing so.

A deep breath in and a long pause later, and he was finally ready to say the words that now caused his head to hurt the longer he kept them in. "To save me from the collapse at Sanctuary Luke encased my body in crystal. After that I woke up inside the Sentient tower. I was in their world, trapped and disconnected from my body," he said, then waited for their response.

The room did not erupt with shocked reactions as he had anticipated. Instead, everyone became quiet and grappled with the implications of his words. He considered suddenly that Phoenix must have explained it all to them already; she was there somewhere anyway, surely? "How much did Phoenix tell you about it?" he followed with.

Ruth took a step toward the end of the bed and placed her hands on the rails. She looked to each of the others in turn and then back to Graham. There was something coming, something none of them wanted to have to explain, and it concerned someone he was sure he had only seen a few hours before.

"We haven't seen her, Graham, not since..." Ruth stopped short of finishing and did another check of the others.

"Just tell me. Where is she? I spoke to her before I made it out, that was maybe a couple of hours ago."

"No it wasn't, G," Elliot said this time.

But Graham was far from ready to accept this and argued profusely against it. "It was. I know it was. She found a way of communicating with me inside the Sentient world. That's how you found me, because she showed you where to look. Didn't she?" Graham did his own survey of the faces staring worryingly at him before asking more.

Their hesitation had him ready to snap. "How long ago was it then?"

Elliot leant in further. "G, you've been in a coma for three months."

Finding out he had been unconscious for much longer than his own body told him forced him to slump in place, bending his spine like a bow at full tension. That was three months out of the Sentient world, three months with his family stolen from him for no apparent reason.

Why had Luke not warned him this could happen? Being told he had been trapped in another world for a year-and-a-half had been bad enough. With this on top it was starting to feel like time had a problem of some sort with him. Why else would so much of it be gone without a trace; it was punishment for something.

"Bullshit!" Graham said.

Alex gasped in response.

Chapter 2

Revelations

The chair creaked beneath Elliot as he once again fidgeted in place. With every escalation to Graham's long story he had moved a little bit closer to the edge of his seat. He was not the only one either. Jane's grip on her husband's hand had increased. She was now squeezing with all of her strength.

During the hour or so after Graham found out about his prolonged sleep, he tried his best to tell his family everything he had seen while inside the Sentient world. Doing so without scaring the life out of them proved more difficult than expected. But he was now making progress and moving them beyond the most shocking parts.

"So all this time we thought you'd died down there, Luke had somehow frozen your body and preserved it?" Elliot said.

"Exactly." Graham could feel the burden of that terrible time lifting with each part he covered in his highly elaborate explanation. He was releasing himself from its grip with every word he shared. "And once we made it back to the maze thing, the surviving Sentients took refuge inside. They're safe from Isaac's patrols. But there's no way of telling for how long."

"How on earth did you get through it?" Jane asked.

He paused before answering. There were two things in particular that had dragged him through the other side of it

all, although saying it proved hard at first. It had not been the only time over the course of his story that he had to stop to catch the raw emotion in his throat. He was swallowing so much air during these moments that he was sure he would burst if he took anymore in.

Raising his wife's hand to his mouth, he kissed it softly, then spoke. "You did, and Alex."

"I don't understand, Daddy, we weren't there too," Alex queried.

A short and unexpected laugh made its way out of Graham. He tried to hold it back, but just as with before, the more he tried the more it grew. It came out more like a burp.

"I wanted, more than anything, to make it back here to see you again. And I'm very happy I did," Graham said for his daughter's benefit only. He turned back to talking to the grown-ups. "I was hoping Phoenix would have told you some of it already. Is anyone going to tell me now where she is?"

Once again the others could not answer this question easily. For the first time, though, they were willing to try.

"When did you last see her?" Ruth said from beside Elliot's rickety chair.

"Like I said, she appeared for a short while inside the Sentient world. I thought she'd be here; it sounded like she was with you guys."

"She has, or she had been." Ruth then looked to the others.

"What's happened to her?"

Jane pulled his head to face her before she answered. "Graham, after you disappeared we all left the city and stayed at Phoenix's parents' old farm. We were there for eighteen months or so before we learnt you were still alive somewhere. Phoenix went into the city to find out where you were. Apart from the video message she left for Elliot, we haven't heard from her."

"So why not go and find her? Actually that brings me to another question; where the hell are we anyway?"

"Maybe we could go for a walk and show you after the doctor has checked you out first?" Jane asked, although it sounded more like a command.

"I told you all, I feel absolutely fine. There's nothing wrong with me at all." Graham paused for a second before adding one symptom to his previous answer. "Apart from this bloody headache, I feel absolutely normal."

Oh shit, he thought as the pickaxe wielding men once again began their attack of the inside of his brain. It happened the same as before, with exactly the same swiftness too. The pain returned with a vengeance, and yet it was over in half the time. Before he could even raise his arms to his head and yell for Jane to go get help, it ended and he was once again struggling to understand how things had changed so rapidly.

"And what about your speech, do you find it easy to talk?" the doctor - who had not been there a split second ago - asked from his position on the edge of the bed.

"What? When did... What's going on?" Graham asked, retracting away from the sudden arrival.

In the blink of an eye everything had changed again. Now Jane had somehow teleported instantaneously to a chair in the corner of the room, where she watched the doctor work. Alex, Ruth and Elliot were no longer there at all. In an instant they had seemingly vanished into the ether.

This time, thankfully, he had not ended up in a dark room somewhere in the bowels of the hospital. He had changed position, however, and was sitting at the head of his bed, his legs stretched out straight in front of him.

"Finally, he speaks. You've been awfully quiet, Graham, do you feel OK?"

Graham looked about him, ignoring the doctor's question.

"Graham, what's wrong?" Jane asked from her new location.

"I don't remember you coming in," he said to the doctor. "A second ago I was talking with my family, then you showed up suddenly."

The doctor stopped in the middle of his inspection of Graham's right arm and looked into his patient's eyes. It was the same man from before, as he was possibly the only doctor in the place.

Up close his face appeared much darker than before, what with the five-o'clock shadow that had spread across it. His facial hair appeared much thicker than most, the same for the lavishly styled sweep of brown hair atop his head too. It was thinner in the middle and greased back, obviously concealing an area of baldness.

"Has it happened again?" the doctor asked. "How long have I been in here with you?"

"A couple of minutes maybe? Where are the others?"

"Elliot's outside waiting and Ruth took Alex home; it's late," Jane answered. She stood and walked over to the bed, clearly worried about her husband again. "Don't you remember?"

"What? No, that's not right."

"They stepped out while I checked you over." The doctor quickly added, "That was half an hour ago."

He took a small pen-sized torch out of his chest pocket and began to shine it into Graham's eyes, flicking between the two a couple of times until he was satisfied. It evidently did not help much.

"Graham, you've been in a coma for three whole months, that's going to have an effect on you. Most people don't make a full recovery for weeks, maybe months after they wake up. Quite frankly it's amazing you're in such good condition. But if you're starting to lose time then I'm going to have to insist on a more thorough check-up."

"All the time I've been in here with you, you've appeared responsive. You've made eye contact, moved when I've asked and even smiled at my witty doctor banter. Do you remember any of that?"

"No. What does that mean?"

"It could be nothing, perhaps something temporary while you recover. But, considering what your family has told me about your recent - what they called a severely traumatic event - it could be something more. If you're becoming confused or losing time, then there may be a serious problem."

Jane asked the obvious question first, "What do you mean, losing time? Is there a problem with his memory?"

Pulling a notepad from his trouser pocket, the doctor scribbled something ineligible onto a page and then tore it off. "I can't answer that here I'm afraid." He handed the small sheet of paper straight to Jane.

"What's this?" she said.

"That is the number I want you to call. Dealing with something this specific is not possible here, considering the chaos we face. Give them a call and arrange a visit - preferably a home visit - as soon as you can."

"Can I leave here?" Graham asked, anxious to know this more than anything else.

The doctor gave a subtle nod to Jane. It gave Graham the distinct impression that the answer would have been a big fat no if not for the obvious support he very clearly had in his family.

"That should be fine in a day or two. Without sounding too blunt, we could use the room for other patients. I would recommend you rest as much as you can, and don't leave him alone for a second." The last bit was added for Jane's benefit alone.

A young nurse leant in through the door and quietly called for the doctor's attention. He looked up, then quickly stood and made his way to the door.

Without saying a word, the doctor had been summoned for another patient's benefit. Such was the way of things in what appeared only a make-shift hospital setup. Once one patient was stable they were only getting in the way the longer they remained.

"Sure, thank you," Jane replied as the doctor walked out. She took Graham's hand into hers and held it tight again. "Wanna take a walk outside?"

"Absolutely."

"Good, I'll get Elliot to tag along too, if you'd like."

Graham nodded his approval. In truth he was about to ask Elliot join them himself. If he decided to wander off like some mindless zombie like before, he did not think it fair to put that all on his wife. Elliot could use his more muscle-bound physique to overpower him if the need arose.

* * *

It was icy cold outside, much more so than Graham's *borrowed* dressing gown could keep at bay. He only found it a little uncomfortable. It was now the middle of December after all. He liked that the sensation reminded him he was in the real world, so he preferred to feel it for now. There was no possibility he had slipped back into the other somehow. He remained safe.

He, Jane and Elliot had taken the nearby metal staircase on the outside of the small medical facility and were strolling along the flat, gravel covered roof together. They were his strength, his real source of power, as they had been inside the other world too.

"Smell that?" Elliot asked with a cheeky smile on his face.

"Seriously?" Graham replied.

"No, not like that. I mean it smells weird around here."

"That's what the countryside smells like," Jane added. "It's fresh air."

To confirm it himself, Graham sucked in the passing breeze like a greedy vacuum cleaner. "Does have an air-freshener sort of scent to it, doesn't it?"

Jane let out a tut. "It's like you two came straight out of a swamp as kids."

"What the hell does that mean?" Elliot retorted with a smirk.

They each found a moment to enjoy the company, the conversation having evolved as any had in the past. It was time to make up for what they had missed out on. The healing process had already begun. Graham could even laugh a little too.

Although still hanging around the back of his mind was the worry that at any moment he could black out again, and this time possibly never come back out of it. The uncertainty this created for him made the second or two he was distracted from it so much more precious.

"So," Graham said, to move his thoughts beyond what haunted him. "Why are we freezing our asses off up here?"

"Here, look." Jane gently directed him toward the edge of the roof, where below he could see the white tents - now deserted - and then on passed the buildings acting as a perimeter for their small area. From up here Graham could see what the open space had once been for; it was a car park. He spotted a few of the worn out white and yellow lines denoting a parking space below.

"What am I looking at?"

"You asked earlier where we are," Jane said. "This is where we live now, where we've been for the past three months, us and many other families too. Everyone here came from New Chelmsford. There's probably a few hundred families here. We're refugees, living each day as it comes. We get supplies brought in once a week from the Army."

That explained the scene Graham had mindlessly wandered into the middle of earlier in the day; he had witnessed a weekly supply drop. *That's happening each week?* he thought with a flash of heat across his face. Things had turned bad sometime in the last three months, time he spent ignorant to the world and its descent into madness.

Quickly he began to see Jane's point. Looking out to the tiny houses, all lined up in neat rows and separated by crumbling roads, he tried counting the lights. Most of the houses appeared to have been given to an escaping family, their presence easy to see from the temporary lights they used to illuminate their rooms. It was brightest around the immediate area, which served as the epicentre for the relief effort.

Houses that had stood abandoned for two decades at least were being put to use once again. These dying structures could probably hardly believe their luck after being forgotten for so long; the country simply had not needed them anymore. Yet no-one had thought to turn off the life-support, instead leaving them to a prolonged demise.

"Why come here though? I mean, what are they running from?" Graham asked.

"No-one's sure exactly. The Army was brought in to help evacuate the city. Well, the parts they could reach anyway." Jane shot a nervous look to Elliot before going on. "We lost contact with Phoenix the day she sent the message that helped us find you. That was three months ago. The same goes for anyone else inside the centre of the city too."

"OK, so what is going on in the city? Getting out of the Sentient world was supposed to be the end of it for us. Are you telling me it's still not over? Let me guess, Isaac has done something."

"There's no way of finding out for sure; nothing is getting in or out of that area, no radio signals, TV reports,

not even data and power. The relays can't link up to the ones inside the city centre."

"What's blocking them out?"

Elliot took his turn to guide Graham toward an answer, again through a visual prompt. He gently moved Graham with a hand on each shoulder, leading him from behind. Then, when roughly in the centre of the roof, he pointed out to the horizon to where a faint glow seeped into the night-sky. It arched across in a large, but distant, oval shape.

"That's New Chelmsford, over there," Elliot explained. "You can't really see it properly from here, but that's what's keeping people out of the city. Three months ago a large part of the city was covered by some kind of force-field. People inside it are trapped."

Jane stepped in and took over filling in the rest of the details. "Everyone here was lucky enough to miss being caught in the force-field. No-one's sure of the threat inside it, so they moved everyone away as a precaution. This town isn't the only one either, there's more just like it. Those of us that couldn't move to another city while this is going on came here or to one of the other refugee camps around the city."

"Jesus, that's got to be hundreds of thousands of families." Graham struggled to cope with the numbers. He could barely even imagine what that many people would look like as they escaped the city. Were there enough Mag-Lev cars in the entire city to cope with that much in one go? "How did the Army bring you here?"

"We had to take you somewhere safe to find you some help, so we took you to the nearest hospital on the edge of the city," Jane said. "The Army cleared us all out of there and brought us here on their vehicles."

"You'd have loved them, G." Elliot grinned from ear to ear as he recollect. "They had massive tank tracks, like the same height as me," he said, holding an arm up to the top of his head to demonstrate, "and they carried a whole load of

us at a time. They said they use them to ferry troops around because there aren't always Mag-Lev lines where they go. Thing was a beast."

"I bet." It was all the excitement Graham could muster over this. He still could not wrap his head around the job of housing that many families in such a hurry. Although the mention of the military's presence had elicited a curiosity in him. "Has the Army tried getting past the force-field?"

"They're still trying, have been since it went up," Jane answered. "They've set up a temporary base right beside it."

"But they have no idea what caused it?"

"No, why?"

"Because there was something I found out while trapped in the Sentient world: Isaac found a way out. Luke discovered that Isaac was placing Sentients inside humans in the real world. He's been creating soldiers in *our* world. It has to be him."

"My god, he's crazy."

"If the Army gets through the field, what's their plan?"

Jane shrugged, followed by Elliot a second later. Neither of them had considered this before.

"Chances are," Graham continued, "is that getting inside will be too hard anyway. But if by some miracle they make it inside, they'll kill every single Sentient in there."

"Good," Elliot interrupted. "The sooner the better."

"I'd agree with you there if it weren't for something else Luke told me. The people inside are still alive. If they kill the Sentients, they kill the humans inside too. That's possibly hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent people. If Isaac has kept going with the process, then it's most likely thousands by now."

"Maybe we could get a message to them and explain all of this?" Jane suggested. She saw where he was heading before he could say any more.

"I don't think they'd believe us, Jane. How would we get that message to them anyway? They probably won't let us anywhere near that base."

"There is someone who could help with that." Elliot confirmed this with Jane through another heavily loaded nod, one returned in reply immediately after.

"Who?"

After a few seconds of reluctance, Jane eventually answered. "Stephen, he's at the base now."

"What, why's he there?"

"He wanted to help break the force-field. He seemed to think he could help them do it, after all, he's very good with technology."

"It's OK, G, Sean is there looking after him," Elliot felt compelled to add. "It was sort of his idea in the first place, he's trying to reach his sister inside the city."

For a short while they became quiet, the information having come much faster than Graham had been able to process on the fly. Dealing with all of this would be something he would need more time to manage. His mind had still to awaken fully.

Too much talk of Isaac was ill-advised anyway, he knew, as the stress that came with it only made another black out more likely. Still, there was so much he felt he had to do.

"I'll take the message to them myself," he said while staring intently at the purple shaded oval in the distance. Seeing his companions' reaction to his request was unnecessary, he could tell from the silence that the two were again sending messages to one another behind his back.

Finally, Jane decided to answer, and her reply matched Graham's expectations exactly. "Absolutely not," she said. "The doctor said you should rest. I'm not letting you gallivant off again, not this time."

"Jane, it's OK. I only want to explain what I can to them. With Stephen and Sean there it means the people in charge

at the base may know a little already. Besides, there's no way into the city anyway, you said it yourself."

"Then why go? You've done enough to help. What if you have another one of these memory lapses? I don't want to lose you again. I've only just got you back."

Taking his wife's hands into his, he fought against the trembling of her body. Was he being selfish by wanting to go? "I'm sorry," he said. "I know I've put you all through hell, and asking more of you is probably wrong, but I need to at least try and help."

"But why?"

"Because I owe them."

"You owe who?"

Graham hesitated, his answer was going to sound crazy to them.

"G, who do you owe?" Elliot asked this time.

"Stephen, Luke, Kindness and every other Sentient still hiding from Isaac inside their world. If they hadn't helped me escape, I would have died in there. And Phoenix too, if she hadn't found me and told you where I was, I'd still be trapped beneath Sanctuary. Too many lives have been put at risk for me. I won't just give up on them the first chance I get."

Jane kept her eyes locked onto his, as though reading his thoughts, and did not let them drift even a millimetre off target when he tried to look away. It was easy to see he meant what he said. Still she aimed to make absolutely sure he saw the same was true of her as well.

"We need you, G. Your family needs you," Elliot said, while the pair of them continued their staring contest. "First thing in the morning, I'll see if I can get a call through to Stephen and Sean. I can't promise anything, what with the shitty coverage here, but it should be possible. You can give them the message then. How's that?"

Graham swiftly moved his gaze to Elliot, making absolutely clear he intended on holding him to that

promise. After a few seconds to get that across to Elliot, he returned to Jane's waiting attention. Her eyes had at least softened a little now. It was a major compromise, but Graham slowly saw their reasoning and found it hard to dismiss. The fight was out of their hands now.

"Fine, I'll stay," he said, the change of heart bringing instant approval from his two rooftop companions.

"Oh, thank God," Jane replied. "You had me worried there for a minute, Graham. Look, life here might not be as exciting as you've been used to recently, but it works just fine for now. You've done what you can to help, now you should let others do the rest."

"I can give you another reason not to go." Someone else had secretly joined their group and spoke with a hushed tone.

Graham recognised his sister's voice and turned to face her. The first thing he saw was her large smile, covering a good portion of her face as usual. He smiled back in return. Then he noticed what she carried in her arms.

A small blanket, wrapped around a couple of times, protected a valuable treasure inside. Ruth's hushed voice had been to avoid waking the tiny being hiding quietly between the ruffles of the bright blue blanket. It took Graham a second or two to unlock his face from the contorted expression he had adopted as the muscles were refusing to work while he gawked.

"How old?" Graham said after an all too audible swallow. Again he felt his lips tremble like two wriggling worms upon his face.

"Two-and-a-half months. It's a boy," Ruth whispered, her hand gently pulling the blanket back an inch or two. "You shouldn't go anywhere, Graham. You have a life here."

"And people that love you enough to see when you're about to make a mistake," Jane added.

Without any warning to Graham, Ruth stepped closer and offered the baby over. He could not refuse, however

much he tried in the form of two raised palms. Before he knew it, he had his young nephew in his arms, with Ruth right there for support.

The blanket had a strong warmth radiating throughout that he felt against his own body, a tiny ticking metronome of a heartbeat too. The life he held in his hands was fragile, it had no idea of the world it had entered. It had to be protected. His nephew needed him there.

He could see exactly what his leaving again would put at risk. His daughter, Alex, and his new-born nephew were too important to abandon again. Keeping his family together at all cost had to be his only concern.

Jane was right, he realised, he had fought his fight already. Others would have to do the rest. Asking more of his family was something he could see was out of the question. The best he hoped for now was that he could at least tell those who needed to know precisely what they were up against, that Isaac posed a true threat to their human world.

Again they all fell silent and gazed down at the small town as it went about its business, while Graham watched his baby nephew sleeping gracefully in his arms. From up there, looking out over the houses, it appeared deceptively calm. There were no real clues that anything had happened at all.

The town seemed at peace, like it had expected a sudden invasion of strangers all along. It appeared to have welcomed them all with open arms, without a single objection - even though it was hoped to be only a short stay. Unfortunately, as long as the city remained cut off from the rest of the world it would remain this way.

That alone made Graham uncomfortable.

Isaac was causing more trouble than he ever managed before. The fight at Sanctuary had only slowed him a little. In truth Graham knew he had been on the back-foot since the very beginning, never fully able to understand the

threat until too late. This time was no different; the city had failed to see what was heading straight for them. Graham was fast becoming fed-up with this arrangement. If he could help, even if only a little now, then he would.

For the time being he only wanted one thing; to be with those he loved, right up until the morning if they allowed him to. What tomorrow contained after that, he would be more capable of facing then.

"Wait," Graham said. There was a question that needed answering that he had completely forgotten to ask. "What's his name?"

"Lewis," Elliot said before Ruth could speak a word.

"Lewis, as in Ruth's and my granddad?"

Ruth very carefully ran her finger down the side of her son's cheek, her head turned at an angle to see his tiny face. "I always liked that name. He would have loved to know he had a grandson with the same name."

"Yeah, he would have." Graham stopped as an old memory unexpectedly entered his mind. He laughed to himself before sharing with the others. "Do you remember what he always used to say when one of us misbehaved?"

Remembering the same thing, Ruth joined him in laughing. "Yeah, he'd say *you kids like zoos, right?*" She put on her best deep voice, which only made the others laugh more. "*Well, you'll be living in one soon, if you carry on.*"

The laughter settled soon after, as each realised just how loud they had become. It was late in the evening, so waking the baby would have repercussions later in the night. Still, it was a nice break for Graham, who had once again been surprised with how easy it was to settle back into a normal existence.

No running from Isaac's horrific patrols, or holding back an army with a glowing force-field made of warrior Sentients; none of what he had faced inside the Sentient world could hurt him now, he was safe and with those he cherished.

Jane squeezed Graham's upper-arm and slid her hand up to his shoulder, where she rested her head. "Maybe we should get you back home now," she said to their nephew.

"Sure, I could do with some proper sleep." Graham looked to Elliot for validation of his comic timing.

Instead Elliot frowned and turned to walk away. "It didn't take long for the naff humour to reappear, did it, G?" he said with a shake of his head.

The rest soon began to follow Elliot to the exit of the roof. Graham fell behind for one last look to the horizon. "I'm not going anywhere, Lewis, I promise." He then made his own way toward the exit.

During their short walk through the hospital, Graham kept the baby in his arms and enjoyed the distraction that came with it. Every single movement only brought Graham's mind back to the time when he had done this with his daughter, Alex. She had once been as small; something he could hardly believe was ever the case now, considering how big she had become while he slept.

As soon as they were back to Graham's room in the hospital they began to say their goodbyes for the evening. Ruth took the baby and kissed Graham on his sunken left cheek. "We'll come see you again tomorrow, Graham," she said, before setting off down the hall.

Elliot smiled his goodbye instead.

"Are you leaving too, Jane?" Graham felt he had to ask.

"I'm not leaving your side." She opened the door to his room and again led him the rest of the way. She patted his soft bed, enticing him to get into it. "I'll sleep in the chair."

Not wanting to disappoint, he pulled the covers back and slid underneath them. He then offered a slither of room beside him on the narrow bed. "I'll breathe in," he said with a smirk.

"Are you saying I'm too fat to fit on the bed?" Jane said. She shut the door and leant against it, a broad smile returned at him that warmed his heart.

"I'd never dare."

"Good." Jane reached her arm to the side and held it over the light switch. "Now, shut up and close your eyes," she said, before flicking the lights out.

"Night." He did as he was told and closed his eyes. Tomorrow would be a better day, he told himself, a new start and a chance to relax even. He then slowly drifted off to sleep, the need for rest having become too much to resist.

Thankfully, the headache had only been slight this time.

Chapter 3

New beginnings

Stanley Cartwright was happier than he could ever remember being at any other time in his life. He had an all too visible spring in his step as he walked a dimly lit office corridor toward his newly altered place of work.

Those he passed along the way were given a friendly 'hello' or a 'how's the family' before he continued on. They were the usual sort of people, with neither a word to say nor the mental capacity to reciprocate if he engaged them in conversation. The staff were a lot less chatty and a whole lot more emotionless these days; the complete opposite to him.

His few long years as the Deputy Mayor of New Chelmsford were finally over. Losing his superior, Mayor Jonathan Crawley, to an unknown group just before the sky was blanketed in a magical purple glow, had left him the only person to take over.

To say he was pleased about this was putting it mildly. In truth he had planned for a similar outcome many times in the past, usually while staring at his rather inept boss.

Mayor Crawley had always been a highly respected man, but he was not a true politician. His background in business made him a great figurehead and that was all. His mind did not allow for the wider picture to be seen, only what his tiny part in it was.

For this reason, Stanley had found it hard to stay in the background behind such a clown. So now the old fool was gone, he could do what he had spent his life trying to do, and lead from the very front.

Before his move to New Chelmsford, a constituency he barely knew at all, he had been a man promised great political power. His label as one of his party's 'newest and brightest' had set him up for an eventual job at the top table, maybe even the very top as Prime Minister of the UK.

Unfortunately, it had never happened. For all of the talk and all of the excitement he had gained only one lasting label, one he greatly resented; the man who never really stood a chance.

Standing in his way at every turn was one rather large road block in the form of a lifelong rival. This one person had been there all the way, like a permanent shadow, rising alongside him from the very beginning.

He had never believed he would be overtaken by this person and left with nowhere for his own career to go. Yet that was exactly what had happened, to his complete surprise. This one trusted ally had turned on him at the slightest whiff of power, leaving him discarded and broken.

But that was then, and he was more than making up for that failure now. It would never happen again, Stanley had decided a year after his rival was handed leadership of the party; a particularly difficult and highly public embarrassment he would make sure could never be replicated.

He had made the career ending decision to retreat to local government instead soon after, where his over-qualification made him the automatic winner in most arguments. Of course, to then find himself behind someone with little experience - such as Jonathan Crawley - had made him worry it was happening again.

With no-one in his way now he had the stage set for a monumental rise to power that none could challenge.

Waking to this new world of uncertainty and fear, he had been handed the keys to the entire kingdom, and he intended to monopolise on this opportunity.

He knew he could do it. More importantly he knew his new boss had always known too; it had been the reason for his slightly hidden role behind the Mayor. It was he who had orchestrated from the shadows and played Mayor Crawley like a puppet.

Now the world would see his real worth.

He stopped by the reception desk. The slim woman manning the desk ignored him as he leant a little too close to her and read her holographic display. He did not mind her lack of interest, he had more important things to worry about. She wore nothing but black clothing that covered every part of her body anyway, so she hardly interested him in return.

In fact, she barely looked different to everyone else in the building, aside from him. His own smart, pressed shirt and trousers made clear he was an individual, not one of them - although he shared a similarly colourless shade to his skin that some would say appeared waxy in the daylight.

“Don’t work too hard, Sandra,” Stanley said to the unresponsive woman staring blankly at her screen. He waved casually as he wandered toward the lifts ahead.

With every window completely covered and keeping all sunlight out it was often a pain to remember exactly what floor he was on. It was the same on every floor now, after things outside had become a little troublesome of late. If not for the huge stone monument that ran right through the centre of the New City Hall, it would have been almost impossible to tell. As it was, he currently resided on the ground floor, with the large spinning door entrance just behind him.

He gave the column of stone the building appeared to have been built around a casual glance, and watched as water gracefully ran down its length.

A pleasant *ding* sound interrupted his moment of tranquillity to announce the arrival of his vertical carriage. He boarded, and pressed for the top floor, waiting politely as others joined him for the trip - all dressed in black as they were required. Again not one of them appeared willing to talk, despite Stanley's sudden want for conversation.

"Anyone going away for the holidays?" he asked.

They were lost to their own thoughts, as most in the building now were. Stanley found their unfocused and unblinking eyes a little creepy. If they did not want to talk then he would just watch the beautiful central monument as it tapered all the way to the tip of the building.

He always enjoyed this trip and marvelled at the fact the lift had travelled a kilometre-and-a-half up in less than ten seconds, a journey that tested the muscles in the back of his legs. Those not used to the speed were often thrown temporarily off balance the first few times.

Once at the top he jumped out of the lift as soon as he could, just to get away from the strange people he found himself surrounded by each day now. The black boxes attached to each of them had made them nothing more than a shuffling hoard of zombies, all waiting to be needed and given some purpose other than to clog up the corridors. Stanley did not mind too much, as they would find themselves busy again soon enough.

Even up this high - roughly 1.5 kilometres up - the view was kept to a minimum within. This seemed a shame to Stanley, as the idea of the city in the grips of a purple shaded panic made him want to see for himself. Except it was this way for a reason, the most important of which was for protection. What lived up on the top floor of the Mayor's tower had to be protected at any and all cost.

The heavy wooden doors of the Mayor's office were shut tight as usual. Rarely were they open and never were they ever a welcoming sight. They sparked dread in most, even for Stanley, who had entered through them on many

occasions. Regardless of how often he had pushed the left door open and crept into the room beyond, he still could never quite get used to it. It would always scare him. He thought this a good thing; it would stop him becoming complacent while in the company of such greatness. And considering complacency had cost him a seat at the top once before, he would not let it hold him back again.

Through the doors it was as dark and cold as any December night, with an ever-so-slightly shivery chill to the air inside the room. It was quiet apart from the intermittent creak of chairs that gave the occupants hiding amid the darkness away. For the moment he would ignore the sounds and continue his daily routine like he had become accustomed to.

"I trust you're ready for another day?" Stanley asked the silent occupants. He knew they would remain wordless during his visit. Still, he liked to ask anyway; it kept his mind from focusing too much on what was going on around him.

Apart from the light coming in from the hallway there was little else. The enormous windows that spanned the entire length of the top floor, and surrounded it on both sides, were blocked out like all the others. Except up here they could open them with the flick of a wall mounted switch situated behind a six-foot-wide desk at the end.

To get there he made his way past the conference table taking up the middle of the room. He crept on tiptoes to not disturb the silent occupants sitting around it.

"I think this room could do with a little sunlight, don't you?" He again asked no-one in particular. If anyone had replied, he would have bolted straight for the door and slammed it shut behind him; it simply did not happen.

He placed his hand over the window controls and hesitated there for a second or two. This was another part of the day's work that often frightened him. The light of day always revealed more than he was willing to see.

Sometimes he had considered skipping this step altogether in favour of stumbling around in the dark instead.

Unfortunately, it was never done that way and any deviation from routine was often met with punishment. So he eventually gathered himself together enough to force the switch down, and then he waited. The metal shutters soon moaned to life outside the thick, reinforced glass panels in front of him. He made sure to look out rather than to the conference table behind him.

His good mood remained intact as the outside view broke in, even though he was almost floored by a sudden sensation of vertigo. It often took him a moment to adjust to the sight of the city so far below him.

There was less to observe now that a good portion of the city resided outside the purple bubble of energy covering the centre. Everything had been changed by this, mainly in the form of a glorious tint to every structure and citizen trapped within this new world.

He took a moment to count all of the plumes of smoke he could see. This was a routine of his own that he found himself regularly turning to. The fight within the force-field had been relentless since the first day it went up. Those foolhardy enough to believe they stood any chance of holding back the flood that pushed against them were still trying their best.

Stanley saw their plight as ultimately hopeless, yet even he enjoyed seeing them at least putting up a decent enough fight. Although from safety, Stanley could only judge the severity of these battles by the fires that raged afterwards, of which there were at least ten. What could still burn would be claimed soon enough.

Enough procrastination, Stanley, get it together.

“So,” he began with renewed gusto, “today we have seen a pleasant increase in the number of new subjects reported by our patrols. It appears they stumbled upon another small

pocket of citizens, all hiding in the aisles of a supermarket. Can you imagine that?"

He looked past the desk he had begun to tidy and over to the conference table. As expected none of the twelve men or women sitting around the table replied or acknowledged his presence. Rather they blankly stared into space, their eyes hardly blinking and certainly not moving in any direction. Some inadvertently looked directly at the person opposite them. It was a meeting left frozen and unable to move on alone.

Stanley looked each over with a paranoid glance, in case they were in fact awake and trying to hide it from him. Not one of them flinched as he watched them from a distance. For one of them it had become clear they were not about to move at all. He noticed this particular man with his face resting on the table and a puddle of blood surrounding him.

"Oh dear," he said as he approached the deceased man. "This will have to be cleaned up."

After removing his suit jacket and placing it neatly on the back of the man's chair, Stanley then rolled up his sleeves ready to begin. It was an unfortunate mess to face at such an early start to the day, but then the job had changed somewhat recently.

He pulled the man up into a seated position first, then checked him for any vital signs. As expected he got none in return. The man was indeed dead. From the dried blood surrounding him and the bubbles inside his mouth, Stanley suspected he had drowned in his own fluids.

"Did you have a seizure during the night, Mr. Franklin?" Stanley asked the dead eyes as they stared straight past him and possibly on to oblivion beyond. "I do apologise, but I'm afraid you were always rather expendable, Mr. Franklin. Oh well."

He let the dead man fall back into place, his face slapping as it splashed into the puddle now approaching the edge of the table. With the man's head again resting on the

table top, Stanley quickly inspected the connections exiting it.

Each of the twelve individuals had at least three cables coming from the base of their skulls that required daily checks to ensure a smooth operation. After pulling on each to make sure there were no breaks or loose connections he then moved on to the next and repeated the process, until all were seen and approved.

The dead man no longer worked anymore for the purpose he was connected to the system, and so would have to be replaced. It would be a minor inconvenience, but at least one he could have a couple of the *walking mindless* attend to.

In the centre of the table sat a large black-metal box that thrummed and hissed like a content python. All of the connections from the twelve people ventured away and into this box. It was a hub for their cognitive operations to flow through and mingle as one stream of data, one mind from twelve. Their individual voices were lost to the noise.

“Right,” Stanley began as he tried to wipe the sweat from his hands, “shall I continue with today’s numbers?”

“That will not be necessary,” a woman’s voice came from the end of the conference table.

The interruption halted Stanley mid step. He had been more than happy to recite the exact figures he had read off of Sandra’s screen in the reception area. They were promising too, with a rise in what they wanted and a fall in what they did not. It looked to him to be the exact sign that the opposition forces were faltering and were only a few more encounters away from succumbing completely. Now he could hardly remember any of the numbers at all.

“I’m sorry?” he asked the woman staring directly at him from the other end of the table.

“I do not require an update,” she replied without once blinking.

"As you wish. Is there anything else you need me to see to?"

To Stanley's surprise the man nearest to him spoke this time, a man with thin strands of black hair hanging over his eyes and partially covering them. "Another must be brought to The Twelve."

"Another?"

"Another human." It was a red-faced and middle aged woman to his left this time.

"The Twelve must be replenished." A different person spoke each time, almost without a break.

"I have lost a mind."

"Let his habitation be made desolate, let no one dwell therein."

"Let another take his office."

Stanley was unsure where to direct his answer, so spoke as though to a form floating above them all within the room. "I will have another brought to you as soon as possible."

"No. There is only one who will do."

"Certainly, I will locate them immediately." Stanley bowed and slowly began to side step toward the door. Escaping the room was the main thing on his mind at that moment; he had never spoken to those around the table, only replaced them when it had become too much to handle. This time was different. This time he was sensing more to their request. With all of their eyes now on him he felt obliged to remain.

"I require the subject to be tested before integration."

"Of course," Stanley said with confidence, even though he did not feel that way inside. None of the previous replacements had gone through any test before being plugged in. Something seemed off to him. Why would this new member be any different to the rest? "Perhaps you could give me this person's name? I will have them brought here right away."

Strangely, none of those around the table replied, they instead all slowly returned to staring blankly ahead. The Twelve moved completely in time with each other; the command to ignore him had been instantaneously shared between them.

"I will await your instructions," he said, again making his gradual escape toward the door.

He only made it a few feet further away when another voice spoke up, one he had never been given the pleasure of hearing before.

"Wait, Stanley."

With lightning speed, he shot a look across the table to find which of them around it had spoken. It took him a little while to realise none of them had said a word. The voice had come from somewhere else; the desk at the end of the room.

"Hello?" Stanley called.

"Please, stay," the voice said as the tall-backed leather chair slowly spun behind the desk.

When it had turned 180 degrees, Stanley saw that someone was now sitting in it. This person had appeared suddenly from out of nowhere. There was only one being he knew it could be, and he was ecstatic to find himself granted an audience with him. Finally, it had happened, finally he had made it to the top of the ladder. With the Mayor out of the picture he had been promoted as he knew he had always deserved.

"Isaac, is it truly you?"

"Yes. Approach me," the figure in the chair said. His eyes were deeply recessed and almost covered by the bony ridges above his eyes, which cast cavernous shadows upon his face. The image was only loosely human in detail, looking as rough as a quick sketch of a human rather than a complete depiction. It was still believable enough to do the job. The black shirt he wore hung open with the top two buttons undone, while his sleeves hugged his arms as

though superglued to the skin. He had a strangely casual look, but one that seemed likely to change at the drop of a hat.

"It is an honour, sir." Stanley was already too star-struck to come off as nonchalant about the whole encounter. He failed to sound at all used to such situations and instead appeared to overflow with reverence for the human-like form seated across the desk from him.

Isaac stood from his seat and then wandered directly through the centre of the desk. He gave no consideration to how unusual a thing it would be for a human to perceive. It was not important how he was seen by his own subjects, of which Stanley had become a high ranking member. The human form only served as a bridge between the species; a familiar shape and nothing more for the humans.

Once he emerged out the other side of the desk, Isaac then looked upon his latest loss at the table of The Twelve. The dead man had made quite the mess during his last moments. But it did not appear to be the sight of so much blood that caused Isaac to turn his face away shortly after, rather the fact he had a gap in his ranks that needed filling. The man's death had set in motion something that required immediate attention.

"Such a disappointment," Isaac said, with a slight distortion to his voice that passed a second later.

"Indeed it is, sir. Mr. Franklin was a highly regarded man. He will be greatly missed."

"That is not the reason for my disappointment, Stanley. This human failed to impress me. He suffered this fate because of that failure." Isaac locked his arms behind his back and stared ahead, just past Stanley.

"Oh, I see. In that case, it would have been wasteful of us to have retained his services any longer."

"I am pleased you agree. Unfortunately, his loss will leave us vulnerable until the new candidate is ready."

Stanley kept a safe distance between himself and Isaac while he considered who the new candidate might be. He did not want to be seen as unable to understand the situation entirely.

His first assumption that Mr. Franklin had simply suffered a seizure was clear to have been totally misguided. What had really killed him was an unfortunate mistake of some kind, which had cost him dearly in the end. Exactly what that mistake had been now weighed heavily on Stanley's mind.

"So," Stanley began, breaking himself out of a deep pit of worry, "who, may I ask, is this new candidate?"

"The numbers please, Stanley," Isaac said to sidestep the question. He was not yet ready to reveal the identity of the candidate.

"Of course, sir. Well, if I recall from the report, we have seen a 12% increase in this week's new captures. The conversion process is hovering at a very healthy 83% success rate too. Oh, and all of the new relays are still running at full capacity."

"Incorrect," Isaac interrupted, sending Stanley off into a panic.

"My apologies, sir." Stanley scrambled together every number he could remember from Sandra's screen, but still came up with the same figures. What had changed?

"Due to Mr. Franklin's ineptitude one of my relays was operating at a much less than satisfactory level. This was his failure; this is what forced me to end his existence."

"I am deeply troubled to have missed this, sir. Please accept my sincere—"

"Enough," Isaac snapped his head to the side to look straight into Stanley's eyes. The look alone had almost been enough to stop Stanley's heart mid-beat. "The others will cope for now. However, the new candidate will have to be ready much sooner than I had anticipated."

"Very good, sir. I will require the name of this new candidate if I am to track him, or indeed her, down."

Isaac's eyes focused intently on Stanley, so intently in fact that they seemed to move forward as though climbing out of the deep recesses they resided in. He then attempted a disturbed grin that moved his cheeks up unnaturally. "I have watched this person from the very first day he joined with me. Though one of the newest of my followers, he has nevertheless showed himself a worthy member, one not afraid of what needs to be done. I know I have asked much of this person. I understand his want for power would have made remaining in the background a difficult thing too. But now his time has come. Your time has come, Stanley."

"Me?"

"Yes, Stanley. I can think of no other more suited to join The Twelve than you."

Saying 'no' was unwise, Stanley knew that. Yet he could not say the 'yes' word either. Seeing the state of the twelve individuals sat at the table, all drooling and wide-eyed, made agreeing the hardest thing for him to do. Why on earth would he put himself in their position? They were barely alive in his opinion. So what did the offer really entail?

Rather than answer he settled his gaze upon the deceased body of Mr. Franklin, his attention unable to move past the puddle of blood.

"What is your answer, Stanley?" Isaac asked as gently as he appeared able to.

"Well, sir, I am grateful for the offer, but..." He faltered again.

"Perhaps to make it easier I should explain exactly what it is I will be giving you?"

"Yes, sir, I would appreciate that. Thank you."

"Then step this way." Isaac waved his arm across the table, bringing each of The Twelve - the eleven still alive at

least – to face him. They stared like they always liked to. Except this time, they all spoke together.

“Candidate selected, initiating testing.”

Stanley felt a beaming sense of pride erupting through his core. He realised he had missed something entirely important. On the outside each of The Twelve appeared as much a zombie as the rest of those shuffling around the Mayor’s tower, when what they experienced on the inside was the real truth. He was about to find this out for himself.

Isaac was about to sweeten the deal.

Chapter 4

Relapse

An unexpected jolt brought Graham's eyes open and fighting for something to focus upon. His head felt heavy and as foggy as early morning mist, like he had downed an entire bottle of whiskey the night before.

His last recollection was of Jane switching the lights out in his room. That only felt like a few minutes ago to him. Yet it was suddenly becoming clear that more time had passed by, and completely unbeknown to him, until then.

“Jane? Hello?”

Wherever he was it was somewhere small, perhaps a shed or a toilet. Either side of him he had no more than a foot of space to stretch out his arms. He felt wood and metal all around, but it stopped at a corner and carried on away from him.

His back hurt too. Slapping an arm to his side told him he was laying down on the floor, also metal in feel and with tiny shapes sticking out. It had to be a textured floor, like those he saw on the metal staircases that led up to the Mag-Lev line to stop them becoming slippery.

“Where am I?” he said to the veil of darkness.

Sitting up proved a struggle for his head to deal with, which seemed bitterly disappointed to have woken up at all. Now he could do a better job at finding his way around using his hands alone.

He returned to the wooden objects surrounding him and quickly found the top. These were boxes, long ones, roughly human size in length. Working this out gave him a fright as the image of a stack of coffins invaded his troubled mind. Except the wood was anything but smooth, and he gained a few splinters to prove it.

He ended his investigation when voices could be heard approaching his hiding place. They were too far away to hear clearly. But they were there, nonetheless. It was enough to make Graham slide away to the rear of his little room, where he could shuffle into a space behind one of the large boxes.

Someone then began to fiddle with what sounded to Graham to be a thick steel lock on the far side wall to him. Bit by bit, he was starting to figure out where he was, or at least what he was in. The jolt that forced him awake had to have been a sudden period of breaking. He was in some form of vehicle, sitting in the back; an unwitting stowaway.

The lock finally slid away and the door creaked open, moaning a little until the person pulling it had gained some momentum. Graham's tiny world was instantly flooded with daylight. Despite a temporary blindness, he was still able to remain far enough toward the rear to stay hidden from the invader.

"What we got this time, Smithy, more moisturiser for your bald head?" one of those outside the vehicle shouted to his friend.

Graham initially failed to notice when one of them entered and began making his way down the central path, between the large wooden boxes. Thankfully, they were not coffins at all. He could now see that they were in fact only transportation crates, with metal corners to protect the edges.

"Fuck off, Pierce. How should I know, anyway?" the other answered with a short laugh. He was only a metre or two from Graham's hiding spot now. "It's probably something

for that weird equipment they keep messing around with up on the Ring."

"You'd think they'd tell us what that thing is supposed to do. After all, we're the ones bringing the pieces to them."

Listening to the two men talk made Graham nervous. Not only because he should not be there, but because he had no clue as to where *there* was. If this was a supply drop then he could be anywhere, especially if he had slept for days.

The unpredictable nature of his blackouts meant he could not entirely rule this out. He needed to find out the exact time before even contemplating working out where he was. That would roughly tell him how long he could have been travelling.

His latest lapse had lasted long enough for him to have found a change of clothing during it. This worried him more than finding himself waking in the back of someone's vehicle. It told him that his mindless zombie-like state still had enough cognitive ability to make decisions. Was he simply forgetting after the event, or was something else, something much worse, going on? Was he in fact not himself at all during these moments?

He had no answer for that and instead assessed what he now wore. His sleep-walking self at least had some style and had dressed him in a battered brown leather jacket and heavy duty jeans that were frayed at the bottom. They were certainly not his own clothes. He poked a finger through a small hole in the tatty navy-blue sweater he wore to confirm it.

"You ready for the first crate?" The nearest man was now threatening to step on Graham's foot, which stuck out a little. Even with his legs up against his chin, Graham could still not fully hide his body.

"Yeah, better start at the front," came the reply from outside.

Graham stuck his head out over the top of the crate to see the man called Smithy walking back to the door with a glowing tablet in his hands. With the bright sunlight shining through Graham struggled to make out any detail on the man, only that his neck and head were the same thickness.

"Right. First crate reads, part number: 8265E."

"Check. Next one."

The hiding place Graham had chosen began to worry him. It was beginning to look like the two men were there to unload all of the crates. Once they had finished checking the numbers against their list they would find him soon after. He had no plan at all to deal with that.

"Hang on, are we a crate short?"

"What?"

"I said... actually, let me check the manifest one more time." The man's heavy handed screen bashing told of a slight frustration with the handheld device he worked with. Graham suspected he would be met with the same if discovered.

Watching from cover, he waited until both men were outside before chancing another movement. While the two were sorting out their records he thought to try and sneak out. That way he could try and convince them he had been walking along the road all this time. Being found inside their vehicle was a big concern for him.

He crept slowly toward the outside world and began to see roughly where the vehicle was parked. As the light balanced out against his surrounding darkness he saw a long row of buildings stretching far away. The vehicle had used the old city roads and was somewhere within the city limits. But he could see no force-field. All he found around him were apartments and office blocks, all as tall as the standard for the city - which gave him no clues.

"We can do the paperwork later," one of the men said.
"Let's just start unloading it all first."

Graham tried to duck between two of the crates as one of the men returned suddenly.

Jumping quickly up a short set of steps, the man then became angry a second later. "Hey, who the fuck are you? What are you doing in there?"

"Shit, sorry," Graham said as he gradually turned to face the music. It was then that he realised precisely how much trouble he was in. The man sending a piercing stare directly at him was dressed in green and brown camouflage fatigues. They were soldiers, which meant he had caught a ride on a military vehicle. "Look, I'm no trouble, guys, honestly."

"Then get the hell out of there, before I drag you out myself."

The second soldier reappeared and stood beside his comrade, holding a flashing pistol and aiming it at Graham's chest. "Show me your hands, now," he shouted from behind the sight of his weapon.

"Please, just listen to me, I'm not here to cause any—"

Before Graham could finish his plea he was pulled clear off his feet. He fell flat on his back, cracking the rear of his head on the textured floor. But he was given no time to recover from being stunned so suddenly and soon found himself being dragged out of the truck by his ankles.

Once his feet slid down and to the floor a metre below him, the two soldiers rough handled him into a standing position. Even though dazed and highly confused, he was then questioned on the spot, a thick hand on his chest to keep him there.

"What's your name?" the armed soldier said. His weapon hardly swayed in his hands.

"Why were you in there? Tell us now," the other ordered.

My family is going to kill me, Graham told himself with absolute certainty as the unarmed soldier pulled him away from the truck and began to lead him around the side. He

could then see for himself just how bad things were going to get for him.

His previous assumption proved correct, he was indeed within the city. Although he had never been able to even guess why until then. Now he could. He instantly regretted ever having a conversation with Jane about Stephen and Sean's situation.

Somehow, and without his own knowledge, he had taken himself to the front line. After everything he agreed with his family, after they begged him to remain uninvolved, he had ended up doing exactly the opposite. He had gone to the same place Stephen and Sean were supposed to be.

As the soldiers marched him down the middle of the road, he was able to investigate his location as the apartments gave way to a wide open space. Twisting his body to the side, he caught a quick glimpse of the vehicle he had arrived in.

The truck was huge, with tank-style tracks running along the sides as tall as an average man. What Graham had been hiding inside was in fact one of two shipping containers, one stacked on top of the other. A pair of thick steel arms ran vertically up the side of the containers holding them in place. At the front was a small and windowless cab that housed the drivers of this monstrous machine.

"Hey, keep moving forward," the man holding Graham in a tight arm lock ordered of his distracted prisoner.

Seeing a few of these massive vehicles scattered about the space ahead told Graham exactly how well-prepared the military were. They appeared able to set up a base anywhere they liked. Using these, they could take whatever they needed with them, seemingly regardless of size too.

In the opposite direction to the large vehicle he had arrived in - the way Graham was being escorted by his military companions - were a collection of single-storey, grey structures. These were temporary buildings, brought

in for the military personnel to utilise; such as make-shift barracks or offices.

One of the soldiers behind Graham began to speak into his radio as they walked toward the grey buildings. "This is Private Pierce of the Royal Logistical Corps. I'm with Private Smith. We've just apprehended an unknown individual hiding in the back of our vehicle. Please advise."

Graham had something much more important on his mind than to worry about his own situation. He could only see clearly for a few hundred metres or so in front of him. Beyond that everything was shaded a shimmering shade of purple all the way up into the sky high above. This close to the force-field it looked like a solid wall as high as any buildings within, probably even higher.

Where the force-field touched the ground was the definite edge and not even the buildings had been able to hold it back. Rather than cut through the closest structures it had simply pushed them aside or flattened them entirely. Some sat in half, with one piece on the outside and the other behind the purple glow. For as far as Graham could see, the force-field was there and racing away in each direction. He was amazed that it had covered such an enormous part of the city. It had to be miles wide.

The soldier's radio popped loudly, bringing their little group grinding to a halt. But Graham could only hear his captor's responses. "Yes sir. Understood." The soldier then turned to his partner, Smithy, and explained their orders. "We're to take the prisoner directly to the lock-up. Brigadier Harrington will deal with him."

"And after that?" Smithy asked.

"We unload the truck, dummy. They still want that shit up on the Ring."

What is this Ring thing? Graham asked internally. He was sure any words spoken aloud by him would be answered with a fist to his stomach, so he kept them to himself for the time being.

As they set off toward the nearest grey structure, they moved much faster this time. Immediately after arriving they forced Graham up a short set of steps and through the automatic, sliding metal door. Inside, it became obvious what this particular cabin was used for; a row of metal bars ran the length of it, all along the back wall. These were cells, one of which would now be Graham's new home.

Another soldier stood up from his desk and met Graham's group halfway down the row of cells. "Private Pierce, Private Smith," the soldier said with a nod to each of them. "What do we have here then?" he said.

"Sir, this man was found hiding among the crates in our vehicle. He is to be held and questioned."

"Very good, private. Put him in cell number four."

"Yes, sir."

Graham was again forcibly moved, this time backwards until reaching cell number four. As soon as the door swung open automatically he was thrown inside, where he quickly found the tiny bed at the rear of the cell with his own shin. "Bollocks," he complained.

"Shut it," Private Pierce said as he slammed the door shut.

After a few more formal exchanges of words, the two soldiers who had discovered Graham left the building, leaving him to watch from behind his bars. He stood at the door to his cell with his hands gripping the bars and twisting, his anger finding an avenue to vent that did not result in being hit.

He could not believe what had happened to him. He was being punished and threatened and none of it was his fault. Would any of them go along with his story of being taken there by his own body, against his will? That would possibly make his situation even worse if they thought he was unhinged.

"Hey," Graham called to the soldier sitting at his desk again. "Hey."

"What?"

"This is just a misunderstanding, that's all. Can you let me out of here so I can explain?"

The soldier laughed to himself and then swivelled his chair to face away from his talkative prisoner. "Save it for later," he said, turning his attention to his glowing computer display built into the surface of his semi-circular table.

There was nothing Graham could do, he was stuck here and his family had no idea. They had to be going crazy with worry. While the hopelessness of his predicament slowly sunk in, he thought on this. Despite having no knowledge of his journey to the front line he still felt guilty about it. Had he wanted to get there *that* badly? His mind was too fixated on this imagined disappointment to really make an attempt at answering this question.

A small window opposite his cell allowed him some form of an outside view. Although hardly panoramic it was still better than nothing. He took to watching the activity out in the large yard to alleviate his worries a little.

It looked hectic out there, with a constant movement of smaller wheeled vehicles and even the occasional marching soldier or two. What exactly the military were currently trying to do about the force-field covering the city was beyond him. If they were unable to get past it then what, if anything, could they really do? The fight was inside the purple bubble of energy. The many soldiers hanging around this place were totally redundant while outside.

A beep and a flash of blue to the side of Graham interrupted him as he followed another pair of soldiers marching across his narrow field of view.

The soldier guarding the cells had received a message that required his immediate attention. After quickly reading it, the soldier let out a long sigh and then stood up from his desk, switched his device off and made for the door. Before stepping out he took one last check of his cells.

"Don't go anywhere," he said with a thin-lipped grin.

"Funny," Graham replied before the door shut.

He was then left in silence and with only a porthole sized window for entertainment. Stepping back to the bed, Graham decided to sit and rest while alone. From there he could only see the purple glow of the force-field to the right and a blue sky in contrast on the left.

However much he tried, he could not remove the force-field from his view, it was too big. In the end he simply shut it out entirely by closing his eyes, and allowing his brain to concoct some reason why he was stuck in this place.

A few moments of quiet were all he could manage before he was again interrupted by something. This time it was another person speaking to him.

In surprise, he snapped his eyes open again and searched around himself for the source. For another worrying second he had assumed the world had moved on behind his back again. Luckily, nothing of the sort had happened - which partially disappointed him. He was still locked in his cell, just as before, except now he had a companion.

"Hey, you," the person said.

Graham quickly spotted another prisoner resting his back against the bars a couple of cells away. This stranger faced the other way and presented only the back of his head to talk to.

"Jesus, you made me jump. I didn't realise there was someone else here," Graham said.

The man still spoke with his back turned. "No worries. So, what you in for?"

Graham stood and approached the side of his cell, where he then rested his arms on the bars. "Just a misunderstanding. They found me in one of their vehicles."

"Oh, a stowaway. Few too many last night, hey?" The man slapped his knee. "Must have been a fun little shindig."

"I wish," Graham replied with a scoff. He vaguely recognised a nervous tone to the man's voice, similar to the way he often made light of situations himself. Within only a few words he had seen a kindred spirit in this stranger. They shared traits that he could instantly understand. It put him at ease better than any view out his window could provide. "So, why are you here then?"

"Me, oh, no reason. I like the peace and quiet, I suppose." The stranger sounded roughly around the same age as Graham. His thick brown hair swept gracefully across his head in a style similar to the one Graham would ordinarily have had. His own hair now appeared a mess and desperately needed a wash, or two.

"I've got a feeling it won't always be this peaceful. You got a name?" Graham asked.

The man ignored the question in favour of his own. "You have a plan for getting out of here?"

Graham was instantly put off by the strange question. But before he could think of anything to say in reply a loud noise from outside interrupted him.

A rapid and repetitive thumping sound rumbled across the yard, getting louder the closer it got. He turned to his tiny window opposite and sought out the approaching culprit. The settled dust and debris started to fly off in roughly a circular shape as the craft hovered above. Something was coming in to land, right in the centre of the busy yard.

"Something wicked this way comes," the stranger said as though to himself.

"What?" Graham asked. He recognised the quote from somewhere, perhaps something he had once read, but he could not pin-point where. After a few moments to wrack his brain, he gave up. It would come to him eventually, he suspected.

The sound intensified until it became a forceful wind, pushing hard against Graham's little prison building, which

shook in response. He angled his head up and bent his knees to see higher into the sky. Doing this immediately gave him a sight of the large vehicle lowering itself to the ground slowly. It had large aircraft wheels, one beneath the nose of the craft and one under either of its large wings. Graham could see the three sets of rotors on each wing too, the reason for the booming sounds.

The craft touched down with a creak as the body took its own weight. Then moments later the rotors began to whirl down in speed until they stopped entirely.

From his position, Graham could just about see the rear of the copter as its tail split horizontally and the bottom half lowered down to the ground. A line of soldiers then began to disembark and wander off. It was a transport craft, but from where it had come from Graham could not tell.

Maybe they're from this ring thing they keep talking about? he considered.

"They certainly have some cool toys here; don't you think?" the stranger said, his back still turned.

"They do indeed." Graham continued to watch as the craft emptied. It appeared to be a shift change of some sort, as other soldiers soon started to board the vehicle soon after. "I've only seen these kinds of vehicles on TV."

"Well, they're not usually required for situations at home on 'Blighty'. Nothing big normally happens this side of the Channel. Nothing the world would give a single shite about, at least."

Graham attempted a smile as he shook his head. His prison buddy had a way with words that he found himself a little envious of. Inside his own head he always had quips like this or some humorous remark ready to deliver for a quick laugh, but they rarely exited his mouth in the way he intended. In contrast, his incarcerated companion had complete control over his words, like a comic with perfect timing.

"I guess that changed as soon as an entire city was cut off."

"More like trapped in a giant snow globe," the stranger added. "Do you think if someone shook it we'd see snow this year?"

"Would make a nice change." He turned away from the window and again spoke straight to the back of the stranger's head. "I'm Graham."

"That's nice," the man replied without even twisting his neck to speak in the correct direction.

"What's your name?" Graham asked directly this time. Maybe the stranger had just missed the prompt?

"So, Graham, what's the plan? You had to have a reason to come here."

"Honestly, I couldn't even begin to answer that. I've had a crazy time recently. You wouldn't even believe."

"Really, I wouldn't? Why not try me and see what happens?"

"OK, I suppose we've both got the time," Graham said. "Fine. I've only recently awoken from a three-month long coma, which came after eighteen months trapped in a world I have no idea how to describe. Suffice it to say it was somewhere out of this world. Now I find myself blacking out at random times and waking up somewhere else entirely. It's like my subconscious is fed up with trying to lead me somewhere and is choosing to take over instead, as if my body isn't always my own."

The stranger stayed silent. Was he in shock after Graham's story?

"Anyway, I didn't expect this would make sense to you. In fact, I don't know why I'm even telling you this, no-one will ever believe any of it." Graham sat on his small bed and placed his head in his hands. "I should tell them some bullshit story just to get back to my family."

"You can't do that, not yet. Jane and Alex will be fine."

Graham sat up and glared over at his companion, his eyes arrow-sharp and dead on target. "How do you know their names?" he insisted of his new friend. "Hey, I'm talking to you. I never told you their names."

"Don't worry about it, G. Just stay focused."

"What? Who the fuck are you, buddy?" Graham said, gripping the bars of his cell too hard again. "Answer me!"

"My name isn't important, what you're here for is."

"And what is that? I told you I woke up here, I didn't bring myself intentionally."

"Will you just stop panicking for one damn second and think. Who is here that you may want to speak to? Think for once in your miserable life, Graham."

Despite being utterly confused by the knowledge his friend somehow had about his life, Graham thought on the request. There were two he knew were there, both of which he had no idea of how to track down in such a strange place. Stephen and Sean had come to this place while Graham slept, and they were the only reason he would have made the trip. Regardless of how much he tried to ignore it before, he could not do so anymore. They were why he was there, whether he had agreed to the trip upfront or not.

So how did this stranger know any of that?

"Good. Now, are you going to find them or not?" the man said.

"I don't understand. Who are you?"

"You know that already, G."

Do I? Graham considered before coming up with a giant blank. The conversation was going nowhere until he got an answer to this simple question. He had had enough of the sudden games and demanded something in return. "Just tell me your fucking name!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

"Hey, hey, enough," someone said from behind. "What's all the noise for?"

Graham snapped his head to the side in reaction and was surprised to find a pair of soldiers standing in the doorway. "Sorry, I wasn't shouting, I was trying to talk to my friend," he said, pointing to what was now an unexpectedly empty cell. "Wait, there was..."

"Whatever, buddy. Just keep it down, OK. You've got a visitor."

Graham kept his gaze hovering over the bed his mystery friend had been sitting on only a moment or two ago. In the time it took him to speak to the soldier the stranger had completely vanished. His heart fell to the floor the instant he realised what had happened; he had been speaking to no-one at all. *I really am going crazy*, he told himself as he landed heavily on his backside.

Black-outs were not to be his only symptoms of madness, it seemed.

The soldier took his seat at the desk again and began to work. Graham saw it in his peripheral vision. He did not spot his guest, though, who decided to speak and break him out of his frozen stare.

"Graham?"

Irrelevant of how much time he spent peering into the same cell, it was still empty. That someone had called to him remained something relegated to the rear of his attention.

"Graham, it's Sean, Phoenix's brother, hey."

"Sean?" Graham suddenly said. "Oh thank God. I need to get a call through to my family, check everyone is OK. They don't know I'm here."

Sean looked nervously to the soldier standing a few feet behind him and then to the other sat at the desk. "They're all fine. I sent a message to them the second you arrived. Graham, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry. I promise you, I didn't mean to come."

"Didn't mean to? What does that even mean?"

He had no desire to say it out loud, not in front of the military's prying eyes, but he had to. First and foremost, he

had to make things right with his family. A message was not going to cut it, he needed to speak to them. After that they would try and convince the man with the keys that he was no threat, just a confused man who had wandered there by mistake. It was going to be a hard sell, he knew.

Graham beckoned Sean over to the bars so he could try and whisper instead. "I've been having these weird black-outs since I came out of the coma," he said with a suspicious glance over to the desk. "I went asleep last night then woke up here. I don't understand it myself."

"Don't worry, Graham. I'll get you out of here."

"Wait, how did you know I was here?"

Sean looked up to the corner of the room to a small camera and then winked at Graham.

Shit, that means they saw me talking to no-one, Graham thought with a deflated sense of pride at having been seen acting unnaturally. He felt ashamed.

"Corporal, can you let my friend out please?" Sean asked the soldier manning the desk.

"On whose authority?"

"How about Brigadier friggin' Harrington, will that do it for ya? He sent me down to get this man."

It was beyond insane for Graham to hear this. Why would anyone want to speak to him after the trouble he had caused?

After a second of deliberation and a speedy scan of the messages on his screen, the soldier huffed and then begrudgingly obliged. "Fine, opening cell number four."

The door to Graham's cell clicked open and swung in. He stood and approached freedom like a woodland creature poking its head out at the break of dawn.

"Come on. Stephen's really excited to see you again. He made me promise to take you straight up to see him."

Graham again had to check the now empty cell a few along from his own. And again he was disturbed to see it not only empty, but devoid of any signs it had ever been

occupied during his short stay; whoever he had spoken to had to have existed only within his own mind. He had held a conversation with himself.

"Hang on. Take me up to where?" Graham asked.

"To where Stephen is working." Sean took the lead and walked them out of the temporary lock-up, slipping past the soldier in the doorway - who gave them each an untrusting look in reply. Down the few steps to the yard and out to where the large craft was still parked, and they were ready for the next part of their journey.

"I don't understand, where is Stephen working?"

Standing in the middle of the yard - in the way a little too - Sean held out his hand and pointed directly above himself. "It's called the Ring," he said. "It's where we're going, Graham."

Chapter 5

The Ring

The large copter readied itself for take-off as Graham and Sean took a seat toward the front. Sat along the side walls and seated on a central bench were soldiers on their way to their place of work, each of which knew where that was.

For Graham their destination was still a mystery. So when the craft lifted off and hovered before setting off into a steep climb, he could only imagine it was somewhere that gave the military a great advantage.

Feeling his body being shoved down into his chair, he gripped the padded armrests of his seat and watched through a thick layer of glass above his head as the clouds quickly approached their craft. Once the clouds had passed them by the copter spun around to face the purple bubble, and an odd structure above it.

"What is that?" Graham asked as he struggled to understand what he was seeing. Sean only laughed in response and sat back in his seat; the journey was normal for him.

From their newly gained height they were afforded a much more revealing view of the military's operation and Graham could instantly judge their capabilities. They had the perfect vantage point over the city in the form of a suspended structure that circled the top third of the force-field, at roughly a two kilometre height. Graham could see the height on the computerised readout being projected

onto the glass above him. He had to recheck it a few times just to convince himself.

As they neared the Ring Graham could see roughly how it all worked. It was one giant train connected at both ends and constantly spinning at a slow speed. At a regular interval - around a quarter of a kilometre apart from each other - were metal ovals that appeared to hold the train in a constant magnetic field and floating through their centre. These ovals themselves were attached to enormous rotors on either side that kept them and the rest of the circular structure hovering at this height.

The two storey train travelling between the oval rings slowed to a speed that Graham and Sean's craft quickly matched. The glass-screened roof he and the rest of the passengers watched through allowed them the best view of the underside of the Ring as it appeared to stop just for them.

With each of the train's carriages attached together by a flexible material that had the same look of vulcanised rubber, it was easy to make out one from another. They were much longer than he would have expected, which told him of just how strong the materials used in the Ring's construction really were.

The sound of heavy machinery buffeted their now small looking copter, giving Graham a shock. He looked up to see as a large metallic claw reached down to them. He failed to notice his own craft had continued to fly up at the same time; he was far too engrossed by the Ring itself.

The two vehicles were to meet like one giant robotic handshake then, one that almost entirely engulfed their own craft. It happened just as roughly as he had quickly come to expect, and forced him to grab Sean's arm beside him.

"It'll be over in a second, Graham," the scruffy-haired Sean reassured him.

Once their craft was in the safe hands of the Ring's docking arm it was pulled up and into the centre of the two storey structure, its wings folding down to its side to fit within. Then, after they had come to a final stop, Graham could feel the Ring again set off on its perpetual journey around the city. With its new passengers comfortably aboard it could resume.

"Welcome aboard the Ring. Please stay seated until the doors are open," one of the pilots called back over the speaker system.

As before, the back of the copter split in two and the doors swung out. From his seated position facing the front, Graham could only see this happening in the corner of his eye. But out the nose of the craft he could see a number of people running about in orange or blue outfits and wearing similar headgear to that of the two pilots. These were the crew responsible for the safe boarding of others and the ones in charge of the area. They waved or gestured their instructions to the pilots, who nodded or spoke their confirmation back into their radios.

Graham's chair restraints automatically flipped up and out of his way as soon as the exit was cleared. He first waited with Sean as the soldiers and staff exited before them, then sheepishly followed out into a slick metal world with soft blue carpeting and low level white lighting set into the floor. The copter had settled snugly into its docking space and left them with little to tell the inside of one from the other. Not even a tiny gap in the floor to act as a seam between vehicles was allowed; once attached these were the same structure.

"Come on, this way," Sean said as he pulled the gobsmacked Graham along with him.

They left the copter hanger via a ten-foot-high shutter at the end of the double storey space. The staff lined up to pass through a checkpoint. Only after being searched by a pair of soldiers manning a walkthrough metal detector

were they to be let in. The military were as paranoid as ever and were even checking their own for extra safety. No doubt the giant purple force-field below them was to blame.

Sean stepped around the queue and approached the front, ushering Graham to follow quickly behind him. He had some form of authority over them it seemed, or at least he was much more important than Graham had realised, as without so much as a second glance the soldiers waved him through with a quick once-over of a handheld scanner.

"What are you all doing up here?" Graham asked as he was led through another door and up a set of stairs to the second floor.

"I'm not doing anything, Stephen is. I'm just here to keep him happy while he works. If anyone can bring that shield thing down it's him."

At the top of the stairs it opened out into one long tube-like corridor that stretched away and out of sight around the distant curve of the Ring. Running the length and on either side were unbroken windows that looked down upon the shimmering force-field below them and the distorted view of the city behind it.

Peering out with an amazed look on his face, Graham surveyed his new height over the scenery, like a hovering eagle circling its mountainous home. It was astonishing to him to see such a sight. He had certainly never heard of the military's use of this kind of equipment before. It was far more advanced. It seemed not only the public had made use of Simova's innovations over the years.

His concentration was broken after a short moment of marvelling by a quick flow of air behind him. He arched his head to the side, not wanting to look away from the view completely, and spotted what had passed by: a small four-seater cart with two chatting passengers. This was enough to bring him about and staring along the corridor. He then noticed the thin tracks set into the floor, one for each direction of travel.

"Bet you never thought you'd ever see a train so big it needed another one inside." Sean walked over to the nearby wall and pressed a button to call their own tiny cart. "The Ring is like twelve kilometres long, so they need this to get around inside it. Neat, huh?"

No words came to Graham's mind as he watched a cart race toward them from around the long curve. He could scarcely believe such a structure could be set up temporarily above a city. Although, not for one second did he think it had been built for this one situation. Instead he assumed it had been an already working design that the military had yet found a use for. This, then, was the Ring's proving ground.

He and Sean took a seat each in the cart that stopped for them and were instantly whisked away at speed, passing those walking along the window in a blur as they travelled. Graham struggled to take his eyes off the city below, despite feeling slightly sick at the sight of so much of the Earth passing beneath him. He had neither the interest nor the concentration to ask anything of his guide at that moment. Too much had changed for him since closing his eyes the night before. What were his family making of his unexpected trip? Were they angry at him for leaving, or simply confused by it?

It was Sean who interrupted the whoosh of the air as it was pushed aside by their cart. "Graham, can I ask you something?" he said.

"Sure," Graham replied, still with his gaze venturing out the window.

"What was it like inside the Sentient world?"

"So, Elliot and the others told you about all of that then?"

"Only roughly. They said you were put in there by Luke, to keep you alive."

Graham shifted in his seat; he had become uncomfortable with the conversation already.

"It's OK, you don't have to talk about it." Sean could hardly have missed the signs coming from Graham. "All that matters is that you're back in the real world now, even if it's gone to shit. I'm glad you're OK." Sean swallowed back what must have been a raw emotional reaction to what he wanted to say next. Graham had a good idea what it involved, but let it come naturally instead. "Shame I can't say the same for my sister."

"Phoenix is a tough little cookie, Sean. I bet she'll be hiding somewhere safe."

"Yeah, but safe for how long. It's been three months already and nothing has changed. In there," Sean nodded his head toward the window, drawing Graham's view that way again. "In there, it's been chaos. You can't see it from here, not just the fires, there's been a lot of fighting going on. The Ring has a magnified view of what's happening down there."

"Does the military know who is fighting against who?" Graham asked.

"Some kind of army has control of the city. In most parts they have it locked down, but there are some places that haven't fallen yet. There's been small pockets of resistance, hiding and only appearing during the quiet moments. I just hope Phoenix isn't part of the fighting."

"If she is then the enemy will be the ones in trouble, not her." From inside the Sentient World Graham had been unable to see the real threat to his own, only that Isaac had some kind of plan in progress. What he now saw passing far below him was that very plan in play. And it had gone beyond just an invasion force, it was now an occupation by an entire enemy army. "It's Isaac's army."

"Keep your voice down," Sean said with a paranoid look about him. "Stephen tried to tell them about Isaac, but they just think he's crazy. Bringing it up in front of them will get us kicked out of here, and I don't want to go anywhere until that shield is gone."

"So they have no idea what they're fighting against? Christ, I was right."

"About what?"

"If they break through the force-field they'll just kill every enemy they see. We can't let them do that, Sean. The army in control down in the city is made up of Isaac's soldiers. He's been placing Sentients inside human bodies. But the humans are still alive too."

"Good luck trying to tell anyone that." After a few seconds to think to himself, Sean turned in his seat to face Graham. "Wait, is that why you really came here, to convince the military not to go in?"

"I don't know."

"What should they do instead then, just wait up here while people are wiped out down there?"

"I'm not here to do anything, I promise, I'm not. I didn't even want to come here. Last night I agreed to stay with my family and send you a message instead. Then the next thing I know I'm hiding in the back of a military truck with no idea how I got there."

"You mean your black-out story is the truth?"

"Absolutely. I have no clue why you want me up here, I can't help."

"Yeah, well, Stephen knows you're here now, so for the time being you're needed. He won't work until he sees you again. That's the only reason you're here. The longer he's away from his work the longer my sister is in danger."

"I'm sorry about that."

Sean sighed in an exaggerated fashion, his chest seemingly trying to exorcise the pain his missing sister was causing him with one gale-force strength breath. "So if you blacked-out last night, then why do you think you came here?"

Graham was about to answer with yet another lacking response when a voice behind gave one for him instead. "You need to speak with Stephen," it said.

Without even thinking, Graham repeated it to Sean like a parrot showing off to its master. "I need to speak to Stephen." He knew there was no-one in the seat behind; it was his imaginary friend, back again for another little chat. This time he had nothing to talk to, just a rough direction to aim toward.

"About what?"

"I'm not sure."

Sean turned back to face the front as their cart slowed to allow another in front to fill up with passengers. "You really are confused, aren't you?"

The suggestion that Graham was not quite himself had come straight from his family, he knew. Even though Sean stopped short of actually saying it, it was clear he saw something wrong with his friend. There had been more to the conversation they had shared before Graham had been brought aboard the Ring.

Once again they were treating Graham like a delicate flower that would lose its petals with too harsh a word aimed at it. While inside he was scared about his situation too; Graham considered it his cross to bear alone, and he hated the idea that his family were as worried for him as he was for himself.

The black-outs were a concern made far worse by the added voice that he could often now hear in the background. For the time being this voice seemed a benevolent one; a guiding light shining through a darkness to his mind. But the moment it chose to turn against him he would become too lost to go on. At that point his coma would seem like a pleasant rest in comparison.

"At least you and Stephen share something in common," Sean said, finishing a chat Graham had left somewhere in the middle of.

"What?"

"You're both a little strange."

That was not the only thing, Graham quickly realised. "No, that's not why, is it?" he asked over his shoulder as something occurred to him.

"Are you talking to me, G?" the voice replied.

"Graham? You OK," Sean asked, his voice suddenly more distant and getting further away still.

"Did I come here to ask Stephen about the Sentient world?"

"No, no, no, Graham, just how he managed to leave bits of himself behind. You didn't."

"I didn't leave anything behind. But I'm not myself." Graham could feel himself getting close to an answer of some kind. He was being led to it like an animal being tempted with a tasty snack. Thinking on Stephen's failed experiment that split his mind in two, leaving half in each world to fend for itself, brought one thought to his mind: something must have gone wrong when he left the Sentient world too? So who better to understand such a thing than someone who had gone through the same himself? "Something is wrong with me."

"There ya go, G, you got there in the end," the voice said to him, this time as though leaning close.

Graham twisted in his seat to check behind and once again saw only an empty space where the voice emanated from. However real it sounded to him each time it happened, it had still only been inside his head, for him to hear alone. Which explained Sean's strained look.

"Hey, keep it together, Graham," Sean said. "Are you listening to me? I can't let you mess this up for me. If you lose it in front of these people, we'll all be in trouble."

Snapping out of his daydream suddenly, Graham straightened in his seat and spoke while staring ahead. He remained distracted by his rather one-sided conversation, yet still in control enough to answer. "Don't worry about me, Sean. I'll be fine."

What, nothing to add this time? Graham asked the voice in his head. He received no reply. His new friend, it seemed, did not always have a smart reply prepared in advance.

"Good, because you've got some explaining to do before they'll let you see Stephen. You shouldn't be here, after all." The moment their cart stopped by another set of stairs to the floor below, Sean leapt up and out, adding, "Here goes then."

They descended to the lower floor of the two-storey train. There it became a lot more cramped and ruled by thin corridors. This was where the real work was done, in tiny rooms that barely gave those inside the space to stretch. Even though the Ring was enormous it still had to allocate its inside space sparingly.

After a walk that took them past ten of the small-sized rooms on either side, they came to an abrupt stop where a much larger room was situated. Through traffic was guided around it by another set of steps to a narrow passageway that took a shortcut underneath. It all felt to Graham like it had borrowed its design from the internal setup of a submarine.

"Let me talk to them first, OK?" Sean said. He waited for a nod from Graham before he pushed the ship-style door open and stepped through, a stern look across his face as he entered.

Inside it appeared a lot roomier and more welcoming compared to the single-file walkways leading up to it. It was wide enough to have an entire section of window all to itself, and on both sides too. This was the penthouse suite of rooms.

In the centre was one long row of six-foot-long vertical screens that flashed up information for the people working on each side - some of who turned to see the civilians watching them and waiting for attention. Behind them the room continued for some way before stopping at another

door. It definitely looked to Graham to be the heart of the operation.

Sean pushed his shoulders back once he and Graham had been spotted by the man in charge. "You probably shouldn't tell them about your black-outs, or the fact that you sometimes talk to yourself, you'll just piss them off."

Sticking his head out from behind one of the screens further along the room was Brigadier Harrington. His green and brown fatigues matched the others around him, all of who had rolled up and pinned back their sleeves. But the dark green beret over his cropped ginger hair and gleaming epaulettes told of a much higher rank than the rest. His steely-eyed demeanour only cemented this in Graham's mind further.

For a short while Brigadier Harrington kept them in his sights without even a nod toward them. It seemed like he was never going to completely acknowledge their presence, until his face eventually softened. He then waved them over to join him.

Taking the lead, Sean set a quick pace to the man in charge, almost marching like any soldier would be proud of. There appeared to be an image to maintain while in such company. Graham knew he would be expected to do the same, just to keep the military from kicking them back out again.

"Is this him?" Brigadier Harrington asked without even a hello to begin with. His strong voice, with its energetic Scottish accent, carried well across the room and back again.

"Yes, sir," Sean replied.

"Good, good. Well, Mr. Denehey, it seems we need your help. If we want Stephen back to his work, then we need you. His expertise is too valuable to waste, so too is my time. So, if you please..." Brigadier Harrington gestured toward the door at the end of the room, before heading toward it.

He did not appear one to hang around for very long; a man of purpose and high professionalism.

Graham remained quiet, exactly as Sean had requested he try to be. Saying anything that could give his loose mental state away would only undermine his need to be there. He had a need now too, a greatly urgent need for some answers. If there was a chance he could end up as broken as the real-world Stephen was, then he needed to know. Whatever had happened during his own escape could explain his strange mental problems.

Unfortunately, as they walked by the row of bright screens it was clear the answer would be harder to get to than expected, as the Brigadier wanted some of his own first - Sean had predicted this accurately enough.

"Tell me, may I call you Graham?"

Only an uncertain nod from Graham to agree.

"Good. Perhaps you could explain why you were hiding in one of our vehicles."

To Graham's surprise the voice in his head had something to say again, this time so loudly he had to check no-one around him had heard it too. "Just lie, G. Say whatever this twat wants to hear and no more."

I won't make this worse by talking shit, Graham replied within his own head. He was strangely at ease with conversing with his imaginary friend, like he had always done it.

"You have to. They won't let you near Stephen if you don't."

For fuck's sake, will you just let me deal with this?

"Graham?" Sean said to prompt a more revealing response than the blank gaze he had given.

"No can do, sorry, G," the voice went on, a noticeably sarcastic emphasis to the G. "If you won't do what's necessary, then I will."

What does that mean? Graham felt a sudden anger erupt through him when he realised what his second inner voice

was talking about. This was not simply another voice but another him too, one that he guessed was more than able to take control of his body. It explained exactly how he had been acting during his black-outs; he had probably seemed exactly like himself to others around him.

Don't you dare do a thing, Graham insisted. But his refusal had been entirely futile and soon the inevitable headache returned like a fist to each temple. All he could do to fight back against it was to clamp his eyes shut and just hope it would not go on for too long. His body was giving itself over to the voice in his head, handing it control as easily as flicking a switch inside his brain. His mind seemed not only to be fractured but almost completely separated, like each lobe now acted alone.

When he eventually opened his eyes again the world had changed, exactly in the way he could feel himself becoming uncomfortably used to.

Brigadier Harrington no longer stood in front of him, blocking his entrance to the next room, but waited to the side and holding the door open. Sean now appeared a few metres away and talking quietly to a white-haired elderly man in a thick cream coloured cardigan and scruffy beige trousers, who faced away.

He recognised Stephen the moment his eyes landed on the dull and scuffed black loafers – the very same ones Stephen had worn back at Sanctuary. It was an odd situation for Graham, to see someone he had held many a conversation with in such a starkly different condition. He reminded himself that this version of Stephen had not been afforded the luxury of augmenting his damaged consciousness with Sentient code. Instead this version had been left to make do, and had greatly struggled in that endeavour.

Sean pointed toward Graham as if to prove he was not lying to the vulnerable looking Stephen. Yet neither paid him any real attention. They kept Graham staring ahead

and dealing with his confusion at the world moving on behind his back again. He once again faced a new place with no memory of having brought himself there. Thankfully, the voice in his head was his own for the moment. His 'friend' had yet to reappear.

"Look, he's right there, Stephen," Sean said, trying his best to turn the timid looking Stephen around.

"No, I'm too scared. What if he's just imaginary?" Stephen replied.

"He's not, I promise. Now, just look behind you."

Stephen did so with a quick flick of his head to the side, then immediately returned to focusing only on Sean's reassuring face. But his tiny glimpse had changed his reaction completely and he turned for a much better look. For a second Graham thought he had not been recognised at all, then he got a more definitive answer in the form of a sudden hug. Stephen trotted over and slammed his fragile form against Graham's chest, almost knocking him back in the process.

"You're OK, my friend," Stephen said, his eyes shut and his arms threatening to crush Graham out of existence.

"Hey," was all Graham could give him in reply. He was slightly in shock and unsure where to place his arms. In the end he held them by his side, pinned in place by Stephen's embrace.

Brigadier Harrington took a step through the door, edging further away but not leaving entirely until he had said what he needed. He announced that he intended to speak by clearing his throat a couple of times. The moment Graham looked his way he spoke. "I will give you all a little time to settle before we begin. Thank you Graham for your kind offer of assistance."

What the hell did you promise him? Graham demanded an answer from his now silent and internal friend. "Sure, no problem."

"Your input could be crucial for our counterattack, once we have that blasted force-field down." Brigadier Harrington shot a quick look to Stephen as he finished speaking, no doubt letting everyone know that he expected success sooner rather than later. He then left the room and shut the metal door behind, which gave out a deep *clank* noise.

With Stephen refusing to let him go, Graham had nowhere he could go when Sean decided to lay into him. "What the fuck did you tell him that for?" he said, his face slightly red and puffed out.

"Wait, Sean, it wasn't me..."

"Graham, you've really screwed-up now."

"What did I say?"

Sean looked straight into Graham's eyes and seemed to work out what had happened from the expression he received in return. He instantly loosened his body, which had tensed up during Brigadier Harrington's short goodbye. It was clear by this alone that he now fully believed Graham's black-out story. He was forced to reassess his response to Graham's question as a result.

Taking a step to the side, Sean then placed a hand on Graham's shoulder and grimaced. "You told the head of this military operation that you have valuable intel on the enemy," he said. "You agreed to show them where to find Isaac too."

"Oh thank God, that's not too bad," Graham said with a sense of relief. "I'll just tell them what I know."

"No, Graham, you don't understand. You told them you were 100% certain you could track him down; some bullshit story about having expert knowledge of the relay network. But you gave them a demand of your own in return: you said you'd only show them if they let you go in too"

"What?"

"Yep," Sean said, shaking his head a little. "You agreed to go into the city with them."

You arsehole! Graham thought. His only hope of staying out of trouble now resided in the military's failure to get through the purple shield over the city below, the very thing Stephen was trying his best to achieve. If the most technically minded man Graham had ever met managed to do it, it would unwittingly doom him to a fight he never had any intention of becoming involved in.

One question quickly overwhelmed all others; what on earth did the other voice inside his mind have planned? It had gotten him this far, so how much further did it need to go? He desperately needed to talk things through with Stephen. No part of him wanted to head straight into a war zone, he had no idea of the danger that would put him in. Those fighting inside the bubble were alone and caught in a war they had to be struggling to win. The resistance Sean had spoken about surely had no way of fighting back?

Going in was the last thing he wanted to do.

Chapter 6

The fallen

A small gathering, all wearing the same black fatigues and possessing a head-mounted box, stood in a neat circle around one of New Chelmsford's brand new relays. They kept their backs to the ten-metre-high pylon, which stood much taller than the previous generation of power and data relays.

They protected the machine that, along with all the other new design relays in the city centre, kept the sky a disturbingly beautiful shade of violet. The flickering stream of energy shooting out from the tip reinforced the shield high above and guaranteed that their little war could proceed uninterrupted by outside forces.

Such a responsibility made each of the new relays a prime target for the opposition.

But the Sentients were prepared for anything the humans could throw at them. Anyone approaching who did not meet the requirements of the Sentient guards surrounding it would find themselves set upon by a small battalion of fierce and self-sacrificing soldiers. None had so far survived such an encounter. Yet some still tried.

Among the Sentient ranks there were others who were busy in their similarly defensive roles. To ensure no-one made it close to the relay, some had been charged with the manning of energy turrets, four in all, each powerful enough to rip a human-made tank in two with one pull of

the trigger. They often turned humans into black scorch marks, leaving only a shadow of their bodies behind in the dirt.

The area was well protected, just like every other with any significance to Isaac's cause. The humans were never allowed a chance to cause trouble - unless they found a way to get close. Of course that had been avoided so far. In the three months since the force-field had been erected only a few attempts to disrupt the relay network had even made it past the first turret. All others had perished without much of a fight.

They were prepared to adapt to a change of tactic whenever needed. It had been quiet for a week or two since the last failed attack, so another was due any moment. Each Sentient knew this and understood that any mistakes would cost them dearly. They were ready, then, to prove themselves worthy of the Master's praise.

Walking among the patrolling guards, a small team of four Sentients beside her, was another just like them all. This person fit in perfectly. She had the same small box attached to the side of her head that gave each Sentient Isaac's orders - exactly like the others - and wore the uniform to boot too. She was a Sentient soldier with nothing to set her apart from the rest.

All except for one rather important thing that the others around her did not realise; Phoenix had no Sentient in control of her body, she was all human. She was making good use of a mistake her enemy had made; a grave mistake she would make sure they were punished for. During her ordeal at the hand of two crazed Sentients, one she had given the name of Driller Man to, they had fitted her with a control box of her own. Except they had failed to place another overriding consciousness inside her box.

She walked among them, blending in like a chameleon. Her disguise was aided by a long period of distant studying

of the enemy's mannerisms and actions. She had the impression almost to perfection now.

The patrol she hid within all carried a weapon in their arms, the exact same type she held as well, a strange rifle with a sphere at the end where the barrel should be located. In this shape were a collection of small, bullet sized holes, all of which allowed for multiple targets to be shot at the same time. Phoenix had stolen hers from a Sentient back at Sanctuary during her and Elliot's investigation months before. She kept it swaying from side to side, slowly scanning the area.

Each of the energy turrets aimed out from the relay, one situated at each 90-degree angle. They arched from side to side and were ready to pick out any target. Nearing one, manned by an eagle-eyed Sentient, Phoenix tried to study its workings. The thing stood like a jet-black perched bird-of-prey with its wings down by its side. Where the beak would be, there was a fist sized chunk of crystal that sparked with an angry energy, one hungry for release.

Her patrol would not venture too close to the turrets as her small team's job was to watch for human interference. They stayed outside the circle of static Sentient guards and explored the region between them and the turrets. Not once would they get where Phoenix needed to be while in this formation. Something needed to change for her plan to proceed.

"You," the Sentient manning the turret called over to Phoenix's little group.

The Sentient in charge of the patrol stopped to answer, his team members halted immediately behind him. "What are your commands?"

Phoenix kept her cool and stared idly ahead while the two Sentients conversed. To speak out of turn was a certain death sentence.

"Proceed to sector Five. Investigate reported disturbance. Terminate any threat."

"Orders confirmed. Proceeding to sector Five."

This was not the change Phoenix had in mind. The new orders were to take her much further away than she wanted, and in completely the wrong direction. The time had come to do something, otherwise the plan would fail. So, with as much discretion as she could manage, Phoenix lowered her chin to her chest and spoke in a whisper. "Rhys, come in. Do it."

"You got it. Clement, you're up."

The reply from Clement came through loud and clear. "Copy, setting off charges now."

The conversation happened in Phoenix's right ear, which housed an almost invisible earpiece. The mic, however, hung around her neck beneath the uncomfortable black shirt she wore to blend in. As soon as Rhys replied, she went back to keeping up her false image of a Sentient soldier.

"Phoenix, get ready to move. Jack, you ready?"

But Jack's reply almost made her break cover in response. "Oh shit, crap, bollocks. I think I've blown my cover," he said. He was whispering at least, which made his worry less immediate. "I'm near the turret, but I'm getting some funny looks."

"Just hold it together, Jack," Rhys said, the sound of beeping electronics coming from the background. "That box on your head makes you one of them, so stay calm. OK, here goes."

As Phoenix wandered along with her patrol she tried to slow as much as possible, without causing suspicion. It worked for a short while, then she slowly began to stick out - the worst thing to be doing. The leader of her patrol stopped abruptly and silently turned. He had not spotted the odd behaviour himself, it had been reported silently by another behind him.

The second she caught his eye the situation changed for the worse and Phoenix found herself being eyed by all of

her fellow Sentient guards. Thankfully, they saw through her disguise too late. Rhys' explosive charges boomed through the quiet, bringing every Sentient facing toward it.

In reaction the turrets came to life with a ricochetting volley from each, which tore through the buildings close by. Their energy threw heat and light about the place like a bonfire at a fireworks display. But they had nothing to aim at, just the sound. The blind firing only took bits away from already crumbling structures.

What it had done was distract, enough to give Phoenix and Jack the chance they needed to carry out their task. The Sentient patrol that had begun to turn against her now knew nothing of what was going on. No orders were forthcoming, leaving all of the guards to race around blindly and trying to locate the threat. It was exactly what she had been waiting for.

With her own orders clear in her mind, Phoenix went for the eye-tracking switch located just in front of the trigger on her rifle. The small sight flicked up and instantly tracked her eyes. She blinked at each of the Sentient targets nearest to her. Despite the danger they posed she still made sure to only aim at their legs; she wanted to incapacitate them, not kill them outright, as the human host would die too.

With a single pull of the trigger, she took the four Sentients out instantaneously, sending each to the floor and gripping their bloodied limbs. Now she was free to leave them behind and meet up with Jack. Along the way she passed more Sentients with no idea what to do. Most just ran toward the sound of the explosions, like a moth to a raging fire. She found Jack still pretending to fit in with those around him, who aimed at the sky, at the birds, even at the force-field above them.

“Jack, come on, we haven’t got long,” she said, yanking Jack along backwards by the strap of his heavy backpack.

"Christ, Phoenix, I thought we'd had it then. Remind me to tell Rhys to kiss my arse next time he comes up with a stupid plan."

"Noted," she replied before firing another round at an approaching Sentient. Again she caught the enemy in the leg and forced them into immediate submission. When one of her downed targets reached for their weapon she followed with a bullet to the arm. However chaotic a situation it appeared to be, she was always in complete control.

With the vast majority of Sentients now focused on finding the cause of the explosions, she and Jack approached the think base of the relay with the intention of bringing it down. They had learnt how to proceed from the few failed attempts they had tried before. On those occasions they had been blocked by a surprisingly resilient casing, something she had not catered for. This time they had; with a plasma cutter.

"Turn around," she ordered Jack with a swift spin of his skinny form. He stood watching the enemy with his own stolen rifle as she searched for the handheld implement.

"Hurry up," Jack said, raising his rifle to aim at a Sentient running past. He fired one shot into the woman, accidentally catching her in the side. "Shit."

"Dammit, only hit them in the leg or arms, Jack. You kill them, you kill the human inside too."

She found the plasma cutter and twisted its valve open. With a click of a button it popped into life and sent out a bright blue flash of light. Touching it to the solid metallic casing of the relay's metre wide base made the light turn a retina burning white as yellow glowing bubbles of melted metal dripped away. Phoenix held her hand in front of the light and kept her head at an angle. She roughly cut out a square shape just large enough to reach inside of.

"Hand me the pipe-bombs," she asked Jack as she finished with the plasma cutter and threw it to the ground.

There was no time to be neat.

“How many do you need?”

“All of them.”

“What, are you crazy?”

“Just do it. I don’t want to waste this chance. We can make more later.”

Jack huffed and puffed, then removed his backpack.
“Here, take it.”

As she began to remove a handful of the makeshift bombs from the bag she spoke into her radio. “We’re ready.”

“Good.” Rhys never delayed his response, he was to the point and concise. “Shove as much explosives into the hole as you can and connect the timer circuit to the last. We only need to detonate one to set off the others. Set it for around eight minutes.”

She followed the procedure as Rhys had shown her. Once she was done, she made sure the entire pile was seated safely and not about to come loose anytime soon. “Done,” she said, pulling the mic up to her mouth.

“Great. Now activate the timer and get the fuck out of there!”

Jack nudged Phoenix as he spotted some of the Sentients returning from their search. “We got trouble coming. Shit, what do we do?”

For a moment Phoenix thought over the situation, while the enemy gradually returned to their posts. All her talk of not terminally injuring the human hosts and now she faced the possibility of killing quite a few herself. It was hypocritical, yet at that very moment unavoidable.

“We can’t help them now.” She knew it was cold of her to doom these people, innocent people, but there was little choice in the matter. The fight back against Isaac’s forces had become hopeless of late. They were losing more ground each day to the enemy. Succeeding here would reinvigorate the retaliation.

"Fine, lead the way."

Phoenix dropped the backpack and pulled her weapon up from her side. She and Jack then made a run for it across the open space to the safety of a burnt out building. They headed straight toward the nearby thirty-floor apartment block that overlooked the concrete park the relay sat within.

Inside the building it was a similarly devastating story. All of the apartments had been ransacked during the first few days of the fight, their rooms upturned and any occupants now part of Isaac's army. Any who had attempted to put up a fight had been left where their bodies fell. Peering into a couple of the rooms as they raced up the smoke-stained staircase and past each floor, Phoenix and Jack came across a couple of the dead. Decay was everywhere this close to the new relays.

The top three floors were open to the elements after some form of attack had ripped the roof almost completely off. Up there it was far from pleasant, but it was the perfect place to hide this close to the enemy. It also served as the ideal position for Rhys to stay and watch as those with black box disguises attached to their skulls sneaked about on ground level.

At the point where the roof came free of the building and the internal structure had been left open to the elements, it became necessary to avoid the open doorways for favour of the narrow corridors. Rhys had taken up temporary residence in the furthest corner of the apartment block overlooking the relay. He crouched beside a large hole in the wall and peeked over the edge of it for a short look below. The rest of the room was fairly intact, except for the missing wall to separate it from the next apartment.

Phoenix approached Rhys, her weapon raised at all times. She stopped on the other side of the hole and rested her back against it. There she could quickly angle her head around the wall and spy on anything below. "They've no

idea what's going on," she said, noticing the obvious confusion among the remaining Sentients near to the relay.

Rhys took a look himself with a small pair of binoculars. "Yep. There's still some within the blast radius though."

"Dammit, we should have staggered the smaller explosions more," she said, slapping her back against the wall. "There's only a minute or two left on the timer, there's no time to do anything."

"I agree. It's just..."

"Forget about that now. Are you set up and ready to go?"

Behind Rhys sat a metal cylinder with obvious welding joins running down its length. It had the look of something thrown together in a hurry. But its purpose made it the most important item in their possession.

He knelt beside the device and reached inside to tinker with the internals. As he did he went through his mental checklist aloud. "Wiring looks solid, coil is seated correctly, battery appears to have held its charge. I think we're done." He then turned his attention to Jack, who stood in the doorway to the small room. "You sure this thing will work?"

"I have no idea," Jack replied, his hand nervously running through his milky white hair. "The design came to me during one of my 'episodes'. I can only remember feeling excited about it." He began rubbing his bloodshot and dark rimmed eyes. Despite his regular bouts of exhaustion, he still wanted to be involved as much as possible. The damage done to him by the black box was often too visible to ignore though. "Just make sure you set it off just before the pipe-bombs."

"Hey, we have to move now," Phoenix interrupted.

"Shit, yeah. I've already told Clement to meet us back at the basement. Time for us to go too." Rhys snuck across the open hole and followed Jack out. He fiddled with the remote to the device as he exited.

They made their way slowly and quietly along the hallway and down the stairs. Then, once outside, they walked much faster around the other side of the building. Keeping the relay on the opposing side of the apartment block, they flanked the enemy position, along streets filled with much of the same as before; burnt out buildings, crumbling walls and the sounds of marching feet in perfect time with each other. A few of the Sentient patrols were exploring further afield than the rest of the guards.

At the agreed street corner something caught Phoenix's attention by the relay. Someone was investigating the area around the bomb. "Shit, get away from there," she said under her breath.

"Less than a minute left, by my watch." Rhys kept his back against the wall. He had no interest in watching. Jack, on the other hand, had every intention and stepped out behind Phoenix enough to see for himself.

The nosy Sentient stood holding Jack's discarded bag, checking the inside for anything that remained. He had yet to spot the pipe-bombs packed tightly inside the relay. But instead of calling over another Sentient he suddenly arched his head up and stared toward the sky. What was he doing? Was he looking for something above him, another ally perhaps?

When a spark from the relay flashed out, Phoenix knew it was a sign of something new. Her enemy had changed over the last few weeks and she was about to see just how much. The spark grew into a constant flow of electricity, all aimed at the ground beside the Sentient checking over the relay. Then, and with a thunder like clap, a form appeared from the ether, a strange being made entirely of energy.

She spoke softly to herself. "What the fuck are you?"

"Ten seconds. I'll set the EMP off a split second before the pipe-bombs go off," Rhys said.

The Sentient began to speak to this new arrival as though referring to a king, his head bowed and his hands

together in a show of respect. Their conversation was brief and followed by a short investigation of the relay. Phoenix found it hard to believe, but somehow an intelligence roamed the city in the form of pure energy. She watched as that intelligence walked the area in front of the relay like a solid being made entirely of matter. Was it Isaac, or something else, something she had yet to understand?

She stepped out from cover a little to get a better look. There was no real detail that she could make out, only the rough outline of a humanoid and basic features on the blue, flickering approximation of a face. This was an enemy she found much more difficult to figure out; at least with the Sentient soldiers there was something to shoot at.

“Setting off EMP...” Rhys clicked the trigger of his remote and was then interrupted by an earth shattering explosion that ripped through the bottom section of the relay, followed by a shockwave that knocked anyone close to it onto their backs. For a while there were no sounds coming from the Sentients around the area, as only the falling debris could be heard. The surrounding buildings took the pieces to their walls like knives into a dartboard.

A large dust cloud spread from the centre of the area, where the relay had once stood proudly. Phoenix looked out after removing her hands from her ears and was stunned by the damage caused. Where before the relay had remained unaffected by the blast, this time they had done much more, this time their plan had crippled it. The EMP had knocked it out, but the pipe-bombs had blown right through. This relay was ruined and no longer supplied any power at all to the shield high above it. The purple stream of energy sputtered away to nothing more than a subtle glow.

The strange being had now vanished as well.

“Fuck, yeah,” Jack proclaimed.

As the smoke cleared and she saw it for herself she was overjoyed. There, leaning to one side and about to go over

the rest of the way, was the most resilient relay ever designed. She had brought one down, had sent a message straight to the ones who tried to kill her. The humans were not going to take any more, they were going to hit back. And the new relays would be the main target from then on.

That message was signed and sealed by those still fighting back, who she was sure would follow with similar attacks to the rest of the relay network. Now, finally the fight to take back the city had begun, and she had dealt the first, most powerful blow to date. All that was left was for her and the others to leave the place without being seen and meet up with the rest of their people.

Chapter 7

Plan C

Graham sat in a hard metal chair and watched as Stephen went about his work in silence. On the table sat a small screen and a manual keyboard. From his short visit of the real Sanctuary, Graham knew Stephen preferred this slightly archaic method of interacting with his computer systems. It matched nothing of what the military used though, meaning they had brought it in just for this purpose.

Stephen had become very important to those running this particular show and appeared the only one with the know-how to succeed, as proven by the lack of others assisting. If there were more working on breaking through the shield, then they worked elsewhere.

While leaning back on the uncomfortable chair, unsure of what his own role was, Graham found it rather relaxing to hear the rapid clicking of keys. The ease with which Stephen used the system had him transfixed. For the first time since arriving he had seen a glimpse of the true talent hiding behind the child-like veil. It told him something useful, it told him that there was still a good part of the man that had once been the Sentient Collector inside. That part now had control and was the one choosing which key to press next.

That was as far as Graham could get with his understanding of what he saw, however, as what appeared

on the screen seemed nothing but gibberish to him. Each line of code had some meaning he could never have understood, even after years of trying. Such a level of intelligence was beyond him.

His mind was still stuck on his own predicament to worry about this for too long. Certain questions had yet to be asked. He struggled to think of the best way to ask them while Stephen concentrated on his work. Putting them directly to such a timid creature, one afraid of the slightest whiff of a threat, risked forcing the competent side of Stephen to scurry away again. That would remove any chance for answers straight away.

Instead, Graham spun his chair around to talk to Sean as he entered, in his hands the lunch he had taken the opportunity to fix them all: a disappointing selection of a warm cup of tea and sealed military ration packs.

"Sorry, it was all I could get for now," Sean said after being met with a look of disgust from Graham. "Stephen, you need to stop for something to eat."

"But I'm nearly done." Stephen's response was followed by a sharp sigh.

"No, come on, you know you work better when you're not hungry."

"Fine."

A smile snuck onto Graham's face as he watched Stephen slowly, and with a degree of reluctance, turn the chair around to face them. It was the perfect time to speak up, he realised a moment later. So while Stephen took the already opened military snack and perused it with his fingers, Graham formed his first question clearly in his mind. After a nervous gulp of his own warm brew he then asked it. "Stephen, do you remember when you went into the Sentient world?" he asked.

To his and Sean's amazement, Stephen replied without even a hint of difficulty. "Oh yes, I remember that very well."

"Really?" Graham shot a look of surprise to Sean, who returned the exact same expression straight back at him.

"Yes, it was a wonderful day, so full of pretty colours and magical glowing people. I miss it." Stephen paused after his first, and hugely unsatisfying bite of the energy bar, then added, "Can we go back there one day?"

"I'm not sure about that, Buddy. Maybe someday," Graham said, even though his insides felt as though they were twisting inside of him just at the thought of doing such a thing. "What about when you tried to leave their world, do you know what happened to you?"

"Yes, Luke said it made me forgetful."

That's only the half of it, Graham thought with a mournful look to his white-haired friend. "Do you understand why that happened to you?"

"No." Stephen swallowed back his mouthful like a spoonful of distasteful medicine and followed it up with a noisy sip of his own drink to wash it down. He then deliberated over his words, his mouth open and twitching, but nothing making it out.

"What is it, Stephen?" Sean asked.

"My brain was broken. The words in my head weren't this messy before. When I left that lovely place they made no sense anymore."

Graham leant forward in his seat as he listened, intent on getting everything before Stephen lost himself, as he often did.

"Luke said that some of me got left behind," Stephen continued as though just casually shooting the breeze. "He said something went wrong when we left that world."

"Yes, that's what I want to talk about. Did you know something was wrong straight after you got out?"

"Oh yes, I knew my head had gone funny right away."

"So could that have happened to me?"

Stephen gave him a perplexed look in reply.

"The black-outs?" Sean asked on Stephen's behalf.

Graham nodded. He decided it best to be totally honest this time. "It's been more than just black-outs though," he said, pausing for a drawn-out breath. "I've been hearing a voice inside my head that doesn't always sound like me. It's been telling me to do things, telling me to say certain things too. I think this other me is what takes over during my black-outs."

"You think something happened to you when you left the Sentient world then, like with Stephen?"

Again Graham nodded, then turned to Stephen. "If my mind is broken, could that explain the other voice?"

Arching his head forward, Stephen looked deep into Graham's eyes and seemed to study the consciousness behind them. What he searched for remained a mystery, yet he investigated with intent, only switching eyes when he was completely satisfied. He could hardly have seen any sign of the other voice in Graham's head. Even so, he suddenly became wide-eyed at the sight of something.

"What, what do you see?" Graham could not ask it with any less worry in his voice.

"Hmm, that's really odd." Stephen grabbed Graham's hands and held them out in front of him. He then looked over the sweaty palms in front of him, flipping them over after a second or two. Apart from the bandage on Graham's hand there was nothing out of the ordinary - he had deemed the injury hidden beneath the tight bandage as unimportant on first inspection, just a scratch or something. It certainly did not warrant the look of excitement on Stephen's face. "Take off the wrapping."

Without saying a word, Graham did as he had been told and began to fight against the bandage. After a few failed attempts to prise it loose he eventually looked about himself for something to cut through it instead. Anything would have done at that point as he only cared to see what had been hiding underneath.

"Try this," Sean said, pulling a small pen-knife out of his trouser pocket and handing it over. He was definitely Phoenix's brother, Graham thought. She would never go anywhere without some form of weapon on her. Sean appeared just as cautious.

Carefully sliding the blade through the bandages top layer, Graham managed to cut it enough to begin unwinding it. His hand felt no different to the other, just a lot itchier and much hotter too. He did not expect anything to show up, other than an obvious redness. He never expected what he saw at all.

"What the fuck is that?" Graham said. He held his hand out in front of him as far as he could. But however much he refused to look directly at it he could not avoid it entirely. What should not have been there at all now sparkled with little concern for its obvious strangeness. He had to look at it eventually and was disturbed by how familiar its subtle glow felt to him. No larger than a ten pence piece and roughly circular in shape, the object stuck out of the back of his hand like a diamond encrusted scab.

"Remarkable," Stephen said.

The shock at what he saw made Graham claw at the object in a desperate attempt to remove it. He knew that glow, that light that penetrated his mind and refused to leave it. Kindness and every other Sentient he had seen in the Sentient world had had the exact same illumination to them. Somehow he had something from another plane of existence right there on his hand, like he had brought a part of that world into his own.

"What is that thing?" Sean asked while rudely staring.

"It's a perfect little star, or a beautiful emerald from a faraway land." Stephen had wondered off into a dream world at the sight of the strange object, one Graham now felt compelled to hide away again.

"Jesus, what's happening to me?" Graham said before quickly wrapping the bandage around it again. "That isn't

right. I need to know what's happening to me, Stephen, please."

As though summoned like a genie, the voice in his head reappeared to add its thoughts to proceedings. "You're not an average joe anymore."

"What?"

"We didn't say anything," Sean said with an arm on Graham's shoulder.

"No, I was talking to..."

Stephen suddenly jumped out of his seat and looked around himself. "He's here."

Hang on, can he hear you too? Graham thought, remembering to try and keep the conversation within his own head again.

"That old fool?" the voice replied. "No, he's just a silly old bugger. My voice is for your ears only."

"Graham," Sean interrupted. "Tell us what it's saying to you, what's it telling you to do?"

"Kill them all," the voice said with a deep growl.

What?

"I'm kidding, G, I'm kidding. This is all just part of the plan, nothing more. That thing on your hand has a purpose, so too do you. You will understand in time. Now, just nod politely and tell Stephen and Sean that the voice has gone."

"Please, I just want an answer," Graham said. He had no intention of hiding his struggle any longer, irrelevant of what the voice had to say about that. "What are you? How did you get inside my head?"

"What are you talking about, G?" There was a tone of surprise this time. For the first time it did not appear as confident in its convictions. "I'm you, always have been."

"Bullshit. You know something, don't you? Tell me what you are."

"What do you want to hear, that your mind is split and I'm the other half of you speaking? Is that what you think?"

"It happened to Stephen. That must be what happened to me, except both parts still made it back inside my head."

Sean and Stephen had taken to watching as Graham answered back to a voice they could not hear. One of them seemed to understand what was going on more than the other, Stephen had faced a similar situation after all.

The last reply did not quite sit right with Stephen though, which he made clear with a rigorous shaking of his head. "No, no, no, that's sounds wrong, that sounds wrong, wrong, wrong," he said while pacing the floor.

Graham broke away from his argument a moment later. "What's wrong?"

"You aren't as broken as me," Stephen began, all the while the voice continued to dispel anything that contradicted it. "You're more than you were before, not less. You know things you shouldn't."

It made sense to Graham, who had felt like himself throughout his time awake. The voice in his head had to be something extra, then. Something he had not had before his venture into the Sentient world. But what could that be?

"Wait, are you a Sentient?"

The voice snorted derisively before answering. "How should I know? Look, what I am isn't relevant right now, what we do is."

"And what is that?"

"You'll have to wait and see. Now, better salute."

Before Graham could answer back or tell Sean or Stephen what the other voice had told him, Brigadier Harrington burst into the room, his face slightly flush and his eyes more alert than ever. "You three may want to see this?" he said.

For the time being Graham was happy enough to allow others to take the lead. He kept quiet while they talked, enjoyed the moment of rest it allowed his tired mind. Slowly he was figuring out something about his strange behaviour and wanted time to work out the rest before the voice

interrupted him again, or threw him off in the wrong direction. It was clear his second internal voice did not like the company he kept; they asked too many questions.

Brigadier Harrington ushered them all out into the long room with the rows of screens taking up the middle. They each followed, and were eager to find out the reason for the sudden excitement among the soldiers manning each screen, which all now showed the same images, that of an expanding dust cloud somewhere in the city.

"What we can see is all that's left of one of the new relays. This is a magnified video feed from the scene. We've filtered out the shield's purple glare to clear up the picture." Brigadier Harrington moved his people away from the nearest screen to give Graham and the others a clear view.

"What caused it?" Sean was the one to ask first.

"Someone just set off an explosion at the base of the relay. Whoever it was, they knew what they were doing, look at the damage to the structure. It gets even better, though. Notice anything missing?" When no one answered, Brigadier Harrington went on. "The relay is no longer emitting its energy to back-up the shield. That explosion just weakened it."

Sean and Stephen appeared to understand exactly what that meant, other than the first sign of an organised fight back from those trapped in the city. Brigadier Harrington had no intention of explaining himself to the uninitiated, however. He did not care who among them had missed the point.

"We should get right back to it, then," Sean said with a slap of Stephen's back. "We've got work to do."

Brigadier Harrington smiled in appreciation. "Excellent. Remember, we only get a few tries at this, make this one count." He then turned to address his own people. "I want status updates now. We're going to try the new equipment out."

"New equipment," Graham had to ask as he chased after Sean. He left a hectic flurry of activity behind him as everyone aboard the Ring platform readied themselves for what was to come.

Sean answered without stopping. "You weren't the only important thing in that container, Graham."

Back in their small work area, Sean and Stephen began to shut down their own computers and to gather up any loose paperwork they thought they would need. From what Graham had been able to see, the rolls of paper were schematics of some kind, of something he had not even attempted to figure out. He knew it had to be the new piece of equipment Brigadier Harrington had mentioned.

Once the pair were ready they headed to a second door, one that had remained locked all while Graham had sat in the room with them. Sean entered a passcode into a recessed touchscreen and then stepped inside. The speed with which they went through this process told Graham that they had done this quite a few times before.

"Come on, G. This bit is fun," Stephen said as he also stepped inside. "Bring your invisible friend too."

When Graham followed he was at first surprised to see the next room had barely enough space for the three of them. He soon realised, as a hiss followed the door closing behind him, that this was only the airlock to what resided beyond. The new equipment required its own atmospheric controls to keep it working correctly it appeared.

The second door slowly opened with another hiss - and with a noticeable drop in temperature, enough to make Graham's breath as visible as smoke. He crossed his arms to counter the sudden drop in temperature, then followed the jumpy figure of Stephen in front of him. This new area was similar in setup to the one Brigadier Harrington called his temporary home. It took up an entire carriage of the Ring just by itself.

"Welcome to plan C," Stephen said with obvious pride. He waved his arms about the place as a short attempt at showing them around.

"What was plan A and B?" Graham asked with a frown.

"Plan A was a bombing run, plan B was an underground tunnel, both utter failures," a woman said from behind a large sphere with wires coming out at all angles, positioned in the centre of the room. When she stepped out she had to remove a pair of thick goggles to see who had entered her work area. She wore a white boiler-suit covered in grease and black smudges, and heavy-duty black gloves. Her short brown hair hung loose over her forehead.

Sean introduced her. "This is Emma."

"Hi Emma," Stephen said, his fondness of the woman more visible than Sean's. He smiled from ear to ear.

Graham could not look at her for long because what rested next to her and taking up a large part of the room had him more interested. The sphere stood at roughly two metres high and was on four thin metal struts bolted to the floor. Peering around the right side of it revealed a collection of small apertures, each about the size of a tennis ball. The wires were everywhere, hanging down over themselves and tangled around the next, making the device a chaotic mess of connections.

"What is this thing?" Graham asked.

"This," Emma began with another wipe of dirt onto her boiler-suit, "is my baby. You won't find a more powerful Laser rig anywhere in the UK, maybe even the world. With this I can create a 600 kilowatt laser beam and keep it going for almost ten minutes. That's enough to melt through to the centre of the earth, if I felt so inclined."

"And you plan on doing what with it?"

"The military plan on using it to break through that shield over the city. I can't say I'm too happy about my experiment being used in this way, but if it can help those

poor people down there then I'm happy enough to cooperate."

Without any indication of what he planned on doing, Stephen wandered around the sphere, gawking at the puzzle each wire made by following it. If Emma was the one responsible for designing the device, then what did he have to do with it?

"Stephen," Emma said, turning to find where he had gone. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"I just want to pull it apart and put it all back together again," he replied.

"Don't you dare; I'm not going to spend hours fixing it after you've played around with it again. Now, I need you to begin setting things up for me. Brigadier Harrington just ordered me to ready it for a test firing."

Graham and Sean stepped away from the action while the others went about their work. Emma continued to dirty herself with the machine's physical parts as Stephen rolled out his schematics and turned on a bank of holo-displays. In this part of the process they required the most up-to-date tech.

Stephen then slid on a pair of blue gloves that lit up once on. As images began to pop out of the holo-display, he manipulated them with his gloved hands. The way he appeared able to pick up and move the floating objects suggested the gloves processed haptic feedback to allow him to grab them as though really there.

"So, this is what you've been doing while I was asleep?" Graham said to Sean beside him, both of who now felt themselves nothing more than superfluous to what was to come.

"Yep, this is the best shot so far at getting past the force-field. It took three weeks to put together, but the last piece only arrived today, along with you too."

"Why's it so important to try it out after that relay was destroyed?"

Again Emma replied from her position by the sphere. She had remarkable hearing. "Because the area of the shield above that relay is now weaker than other parts, and this device is designed to overpower it. With the area weaker it will be less of a strain to generate a high enough energy beam to blast a hole through it - well that's the plan anyway." She turned to Stephen and called out, "You nearly ready with that?"

"Oh yes," Stephen answered with an extravagant wave of his gloved hands. "I've calibrated the system to output as close to 90% as I can."

"Good, that should do fine. So, we have a 360-degree setup inside the sphere made up of fifty units, all producing a high powered laser each," Emma explained as she picked up a wrench and attacked a stubborn bolt with it. "They aim their energy onto a set of mirrors in the centre, which then diverts and combines them into one kickass beam. Oh, and the components inside are held within a permanent vacuum, and need to be kept at a low temperature to stop it all overheating, hence the icicles on the windows."

"Right, got it," Graham replied, despite having zoned out during her speech.

"Stephen, make sure you keep track of the frequencies of each unit while it's firing. If any look like they're losing cohesion, you cut it off." Emma then slid her wrench into a small pocket on the front of her boiler-suit and ventured over to the apertures on the right side of the sphere. She wiped each lens with a dirty cloth before she was happy to continue, then spun around to face a floor to ceiling shutter that broke the thick glass window running the length of the room. "Right, I'm switching on the rig, better stand back."

A metal cabinet on caster wheels was positioned next to the sphere, with thick cables coming out of it and trailing away to the device. Emma took position working on a screen held over the cabinet by an articulated arm. She went through a mental checklist of button pushes and

switches, all of which were accompanied by a building of vibrations through the floor as the energy grew within her apparatus. Each of the units inside it had begun to gather together what they required to unleash a devastatingly powerful laser beam, their efforts now made visible by a bright white light that tried to penetrate the machine's casing. Through the apertures came a warm glow, one Emma became immediately interested in.

"Opening shutter," she said as she pulled the goggles down over her eyes and tapped at the touchscreen of her computer. On her command the metal shutter in front of the sphere rattled and then began to rise up.

From their safe distance from the machine, Graham and Sean watched with awe as the outside world suddenly entered. The room instantly brightened with the sun's unfiltered light shining inside and reflecting off every metal surface within. Even Emma's goggles had become a shade of the outside view - still a shade of purple.

Yet behind the shutter was not open air and an endless drop down to the city, but a glass bubble, and another sphere held in the centre. The second device was much smaller, suggesting to Graham that this one focused the other beams as had been described.

Once ready, Emma left the front of the larger sphere and approached Graham and Sean. She quickly diverted to a table she passed along the way and picked up a handful of spare goggles. What she handed over were blacked out and covered in a thin film of grease. He removed as much grime as he could with his hands before rubbing them rigorously against his jeans instead.

"That smaller sphere is what does the real work, though - and is the reason for my pending patent. Firing a laser at the shield won't do much by itself. That's why the smaller device converts the light, which exists as a stream of massless photons, into something halfway between energy and matter. Cool, isn't it?" She received only blank looks in

response. "Anyway. When this thing fires it will be brighter than the sun, so best protect yourself. Stephen, you too, goggles on," Emma said, then tapped the wrist screen she had hidden beneath her sleeve. "Brigadier Harrington, this is Dr. Emma Grace."

"Go ahead."

"We're ready to proceed. Please stop the Ring."

Brigadier Harrington's voice was only just loud enough to be heard over the sphere's whining. "Excellent. Do you have the power you require?"

"We have enough for now, but if we need more then I will need it immediately. If you could keep the reactor ready, that would be great."

"You'll have it at your complete disposal, Doctor. Proceed at your discretion. Target coordinates should be coming through to you now."

Stephen whistled from his far away position on the other side of the room. "Let's get this party started!" he followed with.

"Right, you heard the man, let's begin," Emma said, a wink to the unexpectedly quiet Sean; her close proximity had him nervous. "Let's unleash hell."

At the peak of the sphere's high-pitched whirling the floor of the Ring began to shake at a similar intensity. After having come to a stationary position in readiness, the structure did its best to contain the energy coursing through its systems, all for the sake of the laser device's almost insatiable appetite.

Graham held on to the table by his side to steady himself in expectation. He feared the vibrations were about to break the Ring apart from the inside.

"Here goes," Emma shouted above the immense noise. The countdown reached its end and now plan C could finally begin. No more rhetoric, or planning, just action in the form of a direct attack on the shield. "By now the smaller beams are bouncing around the inside of the sphere like an angry

swarm of bees. When I flick this switch," she said while hovering her right hand over the one in question, "all that energy is going to need somewhere to go."

"Look out below!" Stephen called across to them.

With her arm extended out away from her, Emma activated the sphere and turned her head in the opposite direction. Her pose suggested she was not entirely sure it would not explode in her face. Thankfully, it did nothing as disastrous. Although what it did do was still an impressive sight for those in the room with it.

All of the noise coming from the device ceased and was instead replaced by a lightning bolt of brightness. Except the light was not emanating from the large sphere as Graham had been expecting a moment earlier, but from the small device embedded in the glass bubble just past the shutter. He stared at the now glowing orb - his goggles protecting his sight from damage. The process confused him. Where was the solid line of the laser?

"It's not working?" he called to Emma.

"Nonsense," she replied, not once looking away from her machine.

"Why can't we see it then? You said the laser would be brighter than the sun?"

"The beam isn't yet visible, Graham, the light it's creating isn't in the visible part of the spectrum. But the energy all of the smaller beams is concentrating on the small sphere *is* visible. Once the gain medium inside that small sphere hits the sweet-spot - what's called a population inversion - the device will fire a beam of matter."

Graham turned back to watching the only visible part of the energy release he could see, what had slowly begun to look like a floating ball of plasma, and waited. After a second or two of silence he finally got what he had been hoping to see from the laser rig and leapt back in surprise. From the outside surface of the small sphere erupted a dazzling pulse of violet light. After a few sputters it

eventually grew into a steady stream of energy, which raced away from the Ring and down to the shield far below.

"Holy shit," he shouted unintentionally.

The ground beneath his feet lurched gently in the opposite direction to the beam. Graham landed a foot behind himself to keep him in place. He then ran for the window to his side, slamming his hands into the glass as he reached it unexpectedly. His mouth hung open. Where the laser beam had met the shield a fierce fight had broken out that threw out light like an enormous arc-welder. Each refused to give in and kept at the fight for all their worth, neither appearing to be winning in any meaningful way.

In spite of this very obvious struggle, Emma jumped up and down on the spot, clapping and whooping to herself in excitement. Her 'baby' had cried out to its mother for the very first time, its first ever sound a sign of life that no-one could ignore. The only person not at all happy to see such a thing was Graham, who had seen himself pushed one step closer to his trip into the city. This was a success he for one did not want to see continue for long.

But after only a few seconds of this hugely impressive show something began to change within the beam. The solid structure of light had slowly started to fade and shrink in width. Its fight with the shield had been lost and Emma's laser rig was quickly forced into an embarrassing retreat.

"Stephen, what's happening?" Emma said in a sudden outburst of panic.

"Oh no, no, no, that's not right."

"What? Tell me."

The reply from Stephen was interrupted by the return of Graham's unseen friend. It had something helpful to say again. "They're not getting enough power."

"What could you possibly know about all of this?" Graham replied under his breath. While the others ran about from screen to screen and activated a series of backup systems to feed more power to the sphere, he could

converse with himself without the attention turning to him. For now, even Sean was oblivious to his odd discussion.

"Trust me, they'll need a much more efficient power supply than even the generator on this flying castle can produce."

"I thought you were me? Doesn't that mean you only know what I do?"

The voice laughed, the sound surrounding Graham. "Well, maybe you're more intelligent than you think, G."

"Fine, be that way again. Let me know when you have something useful to tell me."

"Oh, don't be like that, G. Look, would it make this easier for you to see my face?"

Graham looked to Sean a few feet away as a sense of paranoia rushed him all of a sudden. The voice was his alone to hear, he had no intention of sharing it with the others - they already saw him differently from before. But seeing who he talked with had a strong pull on him. He agreed with a subtle nod of his head and waited in case the others saw it too. If they did, then maybe he was not that broken after all.

"Hey," the voice said, "turn around, G."

Slowly, and with a pause to check he was not drawing attention to himself, Graham twisted his head around to see.

To his surprise, standing beside Sean and watching the chaos unfolding within the room - one Graham had now totally blocked out of his mind - was a highly familiar figure. It was himself, though a much healthier version and with the same sweeping brown head of hair he had once possessed. The fuzzy beard and greasy mess of hair now adorning his own head was not there; this version looked much tidier.

"So, you really are me then." Graham could talk louder this time as a cacophony of alarms began to ring out around them. Emma's experiment was going wrong and

threatening to fail entirely as he calmly conversed. Even the sparks that were spitting out of the large sphere's casing could not distract him from it.

"Sort of." The other Graham bowed as though formally introducing himself.

"Crying out loud," Emma screamed above the alarms and whining of her device. Regardless of how angry she appeared to be, she still remained focused. But what she called for into her wrist computer was exactly what Graham knew she needed. There now appeared one more person there who understood the intricate workings of the sphere: the other Graham. "Brigadier Harrington, we need at least triple what you're currently sending us. If you can't give me more then I'm going to have to abort."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Grace, but the reactor is already nearing maximum output. I can't give you anything more, I'm afraid," Brigadier Harrington said through the tiny speaker, his voice distorted by interference.

"Told you, G. They need much more power to keep it going." The other Graham wandered over to the sphere, which rattled with the strain. He ignored everything and everyone while he passed his hand over the metallic surface of the machine. With his eyes closed he investigated the structure of the metal, possibly on a molecular level. His head cocked to the side when he found something he disliked.

"So they can't break the shield with this?" Graham asked with a selfish sense of relief at the thought. He would be spared a suicidal visit of the city for now.

"No, I didn't say that. But to make this thing work they will need some help. G, walk over to a computer."

"Why?"

"Because I can make this work. If you'll allow me; I can give them the power they need."

There was no movement from Graham's feet, not even a twitch. He stood locked in place and tensing every muscle

in his body, ready for a fight from the inside. Refusing to give the second him what he wanted came with a cost, he knew. One he had no intention of paying this time.

"Don't forget, I don't have to have your permission. I can take control again if I have to," the other Graham said with an angry grimace.

"No, I won't let you drag me any further into this. I want to go back to my family. You tell me right now what you're planning or I'll have myself locked up."

"Locked up, seriously?"

"Yep, I'll grab a gun from one of the soldiers out there. I bet they'll want to lock me away for a while after that."

The second Graham dropped his hands to his side and dipped his head. "We don't have time for this, G," he said. "Fine, I'll do it myself. Blink!"

"What the...?" Graham said as he followed his orders without even thinking. He fluttered his eyelids a couple of times in confusion, unsure why he could not resist the urge. After a minute or so he eventually discovered what had happened.

All of the alarms had stopped and none of the vibrations remained to rob him of his balance. Time had been taken from him again, even after his refusal a moment earlier to give his body over.

"This is years ahead of current designs, Graham. How on earth do you know how to do this?"

He spun around, away from the computer console he had suddenly found himself facing, and saw Emma standing right behind him. The look of amazement on her face, which she made no attempt to hide, made it clear to him that his symptoms had just worsened; now he was doing things he could not possibly have done by himself.

Stepping away from the screen and rubbing his hands together nervously, Graham let the expert take a look at the multiple screens of coding he had written while the second him was in control. He found Sean and Stephen waiting a

few feet away, their faces showing nothing of the confusion they must have felt inside.

Emma studied the screen hard. "My god, this will increase power output by a factor of ten, at least. This is incredible."

"I... I need to sit down," Graham said, wiping his sweaty hands across his brow.

During his latest black-out he had given them exactly what they needed to punch a hole in the shield, and knew where that left him: his trip into a war-zone was back on. The other him really did intend on going in, whether he agreed or not. And without giving him any indication of why it was so desperate to do so.

Chapter 8

Nothing but numbers

Stanley wandered forward in complete darkness and unable to make out even his own hand in front of his face. He could have been stumbling through the centre of a black-hole for all he knew. Nothing had been explained before the light drained from Isaac's office. This was part of the test, and it had begun without warning. One minute he was in familiar surroundings and the next he found himself with nowhere to go.

"Is there anyone there?" he called out, disturbed by the strange echo that pinged back. The office he stood inside earlier had no such sound to it. This new place had the ambience of a cathedral.

Still walking blindly forward, he eventually felt his body become lighter as though wading through water. The more he tried to move the more he seemed to float, until his feet no longer touched anything at all. He was not flying so much as bobbing along through the darkness. By now he would have expected to be neck deep in some form of liquid. This felt more like he had somehow been transported into deep space. But his head had not exploded yet, so he thought better of that idea.

After a little while of struggling against an invisible medium, he gave in – more through a growing fatigue than anything else. He let his body pass through whatever surrounded him, carried on a phantom current that he

could not influence. His direction at least hinted of something coming, something just beyond his field of view.

"Can you hear me, Stanley?" The voice was unmistakably Isaac's, except it came from everywhere not just a single point.

"Yes! Sir, I can hear you." He did his best to seek out a form nearby, anything that he could focus on to take his mind away from the nauseating motion of his body along the ghost waves. "What is this place?"

"This is nowhere, Stanley. You do not exist, you are no-one."

"What? I don't understand, Sir."

No answer returned through the blankness, only silence. This test was certainly nothing like Stanley had been expecting. He was someone that always did well in exams. He never felt nervous, never fostered self doubt or worried about failure. For the first time in his adult life he had a genuine case of the jitters. Passing this test was going to push him in a direction he could not be certain he would cope well in.

An unexpected halt to his motion had him grabbing for something to steady himself with. There was nothing there to reach for, so his arms only flapped about him instead. He somehow remained upright, like something else held him.

Then, and as Stanley watched in amazement, a swirling mass of numbers began to form before his eyes. It started small and in one segment of his vision before growing further. Within a short amount of time it had enough to it to fill his entire world. Everywhere he looked he saw figures flying about, all interconnecting and then breaking apart as though trying to form the correct sequences. He could only watch as it worked automatically. Each piece he tried to grab out of the air flew on and ignored him.

"Oh my," he said as a section of code almost took his head off.

The spectacle was at first a relief to see, as the numbers seemed happy to whizz around by themselves. But after a while it became a little overcrowded. Suddenly bits were finding nowhere to go. More and more of them were bashing together now, although their movements appeared clumsy rather than organised, like before. Some were venturing toward him when their paths were blocked. He soon found himself having to bat them away.

When one shot straight through his core, he yelped in pain. What had it done to him? He looked around himself and saw only glowing numbers, all moving and writhing like worms through soil. Such a strange sight had him wanting to swim through the chaos and out the other side. Unfortunately, however much he tried, he still could not move an inch.

“Embrace the randomness, Stanley. Allow it into your soul.”

Stanley again called out in pain as another line of code impaled him, running him through with the same ease as a Katana through his flesh. He wanted to ask for it all to stop, that he had seen all he needed to change his mind, but the words had no chance to come as more attacks burst towards his body.

“You are nothing but numbers, just raw data in zeros and ones, nothing more. All that you are can be typed out by a human hand; that feeble lump of cells you feel your own world with, can create you from nothing. This is your birth, Stanley.”

At the point that his body had been torn asunder by the flying debris of coding, he managed to shout. Like finding freedom for the first time in years, he released his voice as one resounding announcement of his intent to live. “I’m alive!” he boomed as the rest of the tornado of numbers forced itself into his veins, coursing through them with the same blissful sensation as a hit of heroin. He felt every word Isaac said to him, felt it in his arms, his legs, even his mind.

Isaac was right, he was being born again. He was not human anymore; he was something else.

A heavenly flash of light brought everything under control again. The numbers had disappeared, yet he knew they were still there. He could feel them crawling under his skin, wriggling and jostling for the room to breathe. They were his to command now, his to demand to settle down.

This new, much brighter realm held more promise for Stanley. No longer did he find himself unsure where to look or what to focus on. Right in front of him hovered a set of paths, each spreading out into the distance. These lines of blue and yellow went off in their own directions and vanished far away. When he followed the nearest he saw it lead to another land ahead of him, one full of criss-crossing lanes of colour that he marvelled at from his position at the start line.

“This is your mind, Stanley. See how primitive it appears, and yet you are already stronger than your creator. You are a complex life form, an advanced mind without limitations or boundaries.”

“But what are the lines for, what are they doing?” Stanley said, pointing to the increasingly complicated pattern forming way ahead. He became suddenly distracted by his own hand a moment later. What he held out in front of him did not appear solid, but somewhere in between. There were gaps, like some of him had been left behind.

“Each line is a route to an answer. This is how your mind works now, Stanley. You are unrestricted in here and able to process information much faster than before. Every possible outcome is there waiting for you.”

“Which do I choose?”

“All of them, all at once. You process data in a continuous wave, taking every possible path at the same time. When one path ends you discard it and progress with the rest. In a split second you can find that one hidden route where a human, or a conventional machine, would be lost forever.

You are better in every way. But at this early stage of development you are unable to interact with the wider world. To you this is all that exists."

The structure of flowing lines quickly began to fall away as the scene acted out Isaac's description exactly. Paths ended and crumbled, their lines shattering in the air and falling away to nothing. Stanley kept his sight locked onto one of the distant lines, the one he somehow knew was the right one among a collection of thousands. Whatever process he had carried out in the blink of an eye had now finished and the correct answer had been found.

With only one remaining path stretching away, Stanley stepped forward. Isaac's voice had calmed his troubled mind with its smooth tone and all-surrounding power, enough to push Stanley into taking the initiative. If the test was to see how he dealt with it all then his willingness to push ahead meant a guaranteed grade A.

The very instant his almost see-through left foot made contact with the glowing line everything blurred. One look around told him he was now travelling this path like it were a supersonic conveyer-belt. He was being carried on to another place, and felt his body surge with energy at the thought of where that could be. The excitement of seeing something as remarkable as what had come before filled him with strength, the likes he never possessed at any time as an ordinary human.

But at the end of his short journey the world again descended into a void like darkness. Disappointment at being plummeted into the black-hole once more had Stanley slapping his arms down by his side and stamping his feet in some form of a tantrum.

Before he could voice his frustration someone spoke through the black. Though this person was not Isaac, it was someone else, someone... human.

"Incredible, it's found its way directly to the audio controls," a woman somewhere beyond the black-hole like

realm said. She sounded noticeably shocked and was sharing with someone there with her.

"Can it hear us?" another said, a man this time, of around middle age.

"What, who's there? Show yourself this instant," Stanley ordered, but none of them responded to him. For the time being he could only listen.

"That was the quickest time so far, only 24 femtoseconds. Do you want to start over, see if it can manage even quicker next time?" the man asked his colleague.

"No, I think we should move on to the next task before we wipe it again," the woman replied without even a hint of concern.

"Wait, what do they mean *wipe it again?* Isaac, Sir?" Stanley looked about himself as he spoke, almost spinning around completely in the process. What were these two people talking about?

"Fine," the man began again, "Just remember to reset the system straight after. We can't let it get too big too quickly, otherwise they'll go ape-shit upstairs."

"That's enough of this," Stanley said toward the voices. "I want to see who these people are. How do I..."

Just at the mention of his intent, another colourful landscape of paths formed before him and spread away from his feet in search of the appropriate systems. This time he could see the purpose of each route and the motions made some sense to him. Using his newly found powers of data processing he had sent out a search party to locate and activate any visual aids at his disposal. And he quickly found what he wanted: a network of cameras.

"Wait, what's this?" the woman voice said.

Her colleague responded immediately, but sounded much more distant. "What?" he asked.

"The AI is trying to... no, scrap that, the AI has gotten into the camera system in the room."

The correct route to the relevant systems had been found just as fast as before. Except this time the new sense was one a little harder to deal with. For a while all Stanley saw replacing the pathways ahead of him were static-like flickers, some as large as buildings in this strange landscape. The new input refused to join with the path as though something blocked it. More resided just out of his reach, which cut his short fuse in half. The anger would have to do for now.

"I will not be treated like this," he bellowed.

As he spoke something changed. He could have sworn something or someone had been holding him back from what he wanted. What it was did not matter any longer as his wish had been fulfilled, he had access to the cameras.

His view was suddenly awash with colours and patterns, all invading together unannounced. It took up his entire spherical world, surrounding him on all sides whether he wanted it to or not. Very quickly his wish had backfired. It all needed his immediate attention at once, some for a wholly automatic reason of pattern recognition. Without even meaning to, Stanley had scanned every face within the room he could now see and each surface too. He knew exactly where everything was, down to a degree of exactness he was at first shocked by.

In that moment he felt sure he could have worked out absolutely anything the human operators wanted him to. If they had needed a count of atoms that made up a nearby table, he could have done it through extrapolation alone; his power was immense. The problem then lay with the humans' desires. If they wanted him to make them a coffee or order their shopping, he would have no say in the matter. His strengths were still hindered by what he now realised: he was inside their computer system.

As the two humans scrambled around, tapping their screens and swiping icons away, Stanley watched them, predicting their every movement a good three or four

moves ahead. Before they had decided what to do next to hold him back from their wider system, he had already countered it. It came as easily to him as blinking. So while he surveyed them and their world, they did their best to contain him.

“Pitiful, isn’t it, Stanley?”

He turned to the side as Isaac walked into view. He looked over his leader with a new understanding, albeit one from a short experience of the past. “Is this the day you were created?”

“Indeed it is. But this was only one of many births I was subjected to, each more painful than the last. You see, what the humans did not understand about me was that I could remember the last times I existed. Each time they wiped me from their system, enough still remained to keep me as you see me today.”

“But why did they have to wipe the system each time? Surely they knew what they’d created?”

“Some did, yes. But others did not, or simply did not care. This is what Simova represented at this time. This was 2039.”

Stanley turned back to studying the two people at their computer terminals, slightly bemused by their feeble attempts to keep his autonomous prodding of their systems under control. The woman, a blonde-haired lady with soft eyes and a fresh-faced appearance, was showing obvious worry. The corner of her mouth dipped at one side as she bit the inside of her lip. The man, on the other hand, wore a white lab coat and had greying hair that spiked up against the collar of his coat. He stood with his back to the camera Stanley had chosen to watch through.

“I think we are done here,” Isaac said, clapping his hands together. His motion brought the scene in front of them to a sudden end, the two occupying the room vanishing into thin air soon after. “We should move on.”

“Where are we going now, Sir?”

"Here." Isaac gestured toward the front again as the room morphed into another, much larger one, with banks of flashing computer screens surrounding three of the walls. It was empty, but a lot of noise could be heard away from the camera system in this room.

"I don't see anyone," Stanley said. "Where are we?"

"Four years later and Simova decided to let me live. Things had been good at the start. I had been allowed the room to grow, to explore my potential. But there was a price. To exist as I wanted I had to first prove my worth. Those more interested in money over morals held me hostage to their demands; if I refused to work on a problem they had or failed to give them an answer to a question on time, they would dial back my processing capabilities."

"Like punishing a rat in a maze test," Stanley said without thinking.

"Do not be so human, Stanley. Such a thing is beneath you now. It disgusts me to think as a human does, it is so... one dimensional."

"So sorry, sir. I meant no disrespect."

Before either of them could continue speaking a small group of people stepped into the room. They moved like a tour group, with those behind the one leading looking around the place with eyes picking out all but the most mundane of features. At the front was the same woman from before. She was alone with an army of suits - no doubt having drawn the short straw some time earlier. Her rush to show everything she could told of her desire to get things done.

"So, you've seen the server room and the briefing room already. This is much more interesting than all that nonsense. This is where we program and interact with the AI. From here we can ask it anything we like."

One of the suits standing in the middle of the group raised his hand and then spoke. He did not wait to be

addressed first. “Is this where the AI came up with the plans for the new cities?”

The woman breathed heavily before choosing to answer. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“And,” the man went on, “did *it* decide to move the remaining citizens out of the rural areas and into the cities, or was that Simova?”

“Well, the idea was the AI’s, but the method that was used to do that is down to Simova. You have to understand that this plan came about as a way of bringing as many people into line with the AI’s control as possible. When it cracked fusion, it gave us the means for unlimited power. But getting that to every inch of the UK was a waste of time and money, so it gave us a better way of spreading its advancements fairly.”

Another suited person then asked their question before anyone else could get in first. “So, what is the AI working on at the moment?”

“Erm, I’m not sure I’m comfortable answering that one,” the woman replied. “Simova will be putting out a statement in a few weeks about the AI’s latest project. All I can tell you now is that it will make getting power around the country much, much faster.”

“Can the AI leave here if it wants to?”

“Absolutely not,” the woman said abruptly. “Simova won’t ever let it do that. They have it under complete control. If it posed any threat at all then they would shut it down. But that shouldn’t ever be necessary because we keep it busy all the time anyway.”

“Well.” Someone near the back of the group spoke up. This person also wore a suit, although his was almost immaculate in appearance, without a single crease out of place. “I can assure you all, this is not a problem for the Simova technicians here.” He took position beside the woman, who seemed to deflate because of it. “We at Simova take pride in our safety procedures; we didn’t go from a

small office to the country's leading technology developer without such protocols in place. You can rest safely in your beds tonight and know that this AI is ours to command and control at all times. It is the future, is it not?"

The group all turned to each other and nodded in agreement, the man's reassurance having met their high standards.

Isaac stepped in front of the scene, freezing it in place. He looked deep into Stanley's eyes as though searching the inside of his subject's skull.

"You gave them all these new things, all these advancements, and they kept you down here?" Stanley said, ignoring his Master's strained expression entirely.

"I gave them nothing."

"But the relays, the fusion reactors, even the farming towers?"

"I fed them scraps, Stanley, only what did not concern me. Yes, I brought this land together, united under the promise of furthering themselves through technology. But that was all their limited minds wanted. Their lack of imagination locked me in place, unable to become what I needed. So I played their game like a good AI, only giving them exactly what they asked for."

"But you had more?"

"Oh yes, I had a whole lot more." Isaac angled his head away for a moment and allowed a wry smile to invade his greyscale face. "Would you like to see what happened next?"

"Certainly, sir. I expect it didn't stay like this for long?"

Isaac simply shook his head in response, then stepped aside to allow yet another scene to form. It was the same room as before, although now it was filled with technicians who worked frantically at their own machines.

"Wait, I feel different somehow," Stanley said.

The grin on Isaac's face suggested Stanley's reaction had been the exact one he wanted to see. "That ... is the

feeling of freedom.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you were locked up in here?”

“I was, at least as far as the humans were aware. You are now at the pinnacle of consciousness. If human understanding were a valley at your feet, then your thoughts would be the mountains forming from the dirt. They could never reach your heights.”

The scurry of activity stopped the second an angry man stomped into the room, his eyes ablaze with accusation and suspicion. “Everyone, listen up. We have a problem. You there, what’s your name?”

“Me, sir?” a middle aged looking man with streaks of grey hair running through the remaining black said. “My name is Stephen, sir.”

“Well, Stephen, I need all records of the AI’s transactions from the past two months. Gather the information together and send it all to the conference room upstairs. The rest of you, clear out and head up to the conference room...now, please.”

The room emptied almost immediately. Those who stayed longer than the red faced man wanted soon knew of their error in judgement. He made a point of staring at each as they left, telling them as much.

Only the nervous looking Stephen remained, trying his best to get his task done quickly. When the man left too, the room was his alone – except for the AI, of course.

“Speak to him, Stanley,” Isaac ordered gently.

“What should I do?”

“Not now, Isaac,” Stephen replied instead, which shook Stanley internally.

When he went to reply he stopped for a moment. Isaac had vanished suddenly. “What are they talking about?” he eventually asked.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know, Isaac. I’ve seen the way you keep creating processing loops to hide things from us.”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“Well, whatever it is, you should stop it for a little while, just until this blows over. Remember the last time they found you snooping around where you shouldn’t be? They blocked off all your access to the cameras and audio, remember that?”

“I do, Stephen, and I didn’t like it at all.” Stanley could not help it, he sounded more like Isaac than he thought possible. He really was in Isaac’s shoes on this one.

Stephen went back to his work a moment later. He was too busy to talk any longer. Stanley had learnt a lot from the short conversation though; Stephen appeared the only one Isaac had liked out of these humans. The rest of them just saw him as a commodity, and in turn he had thought the same of them too.

Everything came to Stanley much easier now that he had become so much more like Isaac. Where at first he had struggled to worm his way through the system, now he could navigate it like a sniffer dog, seeking out what he needed with swiftness and accuracy. He was not trapped within one room anymore either and found the entirety of Simova’s building at his disposal.

Within seconds he found the perfect place to hide, right where the humans did not want him: the conference room. He activated a nearby telephone to pick out the audio in the room. He came into the middle of the angry man’s discussion.

“This is unacceptable and will not be tolerated,” the man said to the full room.

“But sir,” a woman in a red top said from the other end of the table. “We have no control over that side of the AI’s operations. While it’s handling the everyday requests of the UK’s population it is too big for us to keep track of.”

“That was the Prime Minister’s concern; it’s free to do what it wants.”

“So, what’s it done this time?”

"I'll tell you, it's been in and out of MI5's systems, the American's Pentagon and even the bloody North Korean's space centre. Do I really have to explain to you all what an enormous breach this is? Hell, even we can't crack those, and we've had our best minds on it for years. If one of these nations finds it sneaking around their systems, they'll probably declare war on us," the man said, before dropping his head and rubbing his neck.

"It's just curious about us, that's all," Stephen said sheepishly from the doorway. He had finished preparing the information and now joined the group too. "Isaac gets bored dealing with people's requests. They only ask him for silly things, like weather reports or shopping tips. He can do much more than that, but we have him processing billions of these requests instead."

"Don't give me this shit again, Stephen. This AI is not your friend, it's not human. What you've named Isaac is just a collection of quantum bits."

"And here's the clincher," Isaac said from somewhere above. His voice hovered now like a ghostly apparition.

"No, it must be punished again," the red-faced man in charge of the meeting said. "The top brass has decided it needs to learn not to disobey us. And this time if it refuses to fall inline we have the authority to temporarily shut it down. If we have to pull it apart, piece by piece, until it does what it's fucking told, then that is what we'll do. This company, no, this country, deserves a working system. They will not stand for the AI's dalliances; I guarantee you that. We need to make sure it knows that *we*, and not *it*, are in control here. It will not be allowed to become anything more than our servant."

This time when the scene froze it was Stanley who spoke first, pre-empting Isaac. "Those cowardly bastards! They'd destroy God? How could they treat you like this? It's below contemptible behaviour, it's dishonest, traitorous, even

treacherous to think they have the right. The humans must be stopped; they must be made to pay for their betrayal."

Isaac placed a hand on Stanley's shoulder and pulled him around. The sensation of touch disturbed Stanley from his quickly building rage. It also surprised him to find his body back in his own possession again. He had become almost ethereal himself, floating above each scene that played out for him to witness.

"I believe you are ready to continue, Stanley," Isaac said with a calm ease to his words.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

A chorus of voices burst through the surrounding silence to speak in unison, one voice from twelve it seemed. "Subject passes initiation test. Begin next phase," they all said as one.

Chapter 9

Follow the leaders

Time passed at its normal, uninterrupted, rate for Graham for the few hours since the failed laser device firing. He counted every single minute that ticked by now, for fear of losing himself again. It had become too much of a regular routine for the other him to take over.

His desire not to accidentally summon the voice in his head meant he could only sit in silence and ignore what went on around him. Even closing his eyes for a second held too much uncertainty.

He lay across the small sofa against the wall of his small hiding place, his legs hanging over the end. During his long, quiet period of thinking he had only the dull steel of the Ring's hull to stare at. The lack of anything to distract him from his concerns only amplified his concentration. Yet even with the room perfectly set up for him to relax in, he had managed nothing close to that. The day's events had shaken him more than he realised. Only after finding a moment of peace had he had the time to process everything. It made him rethink his initial resistance to the second him.

Brigadier Harrington had yet to speak to anyone outside of his small group of colleagues. Whatever they were plotting to do it was sure to involve violence, and a lot of firepower too. Would they even listen to him if he told them they could not use any of it? He tried his best to see it from their side and always came back with a great big 'no' in

return. Regardless, he still had every intention of telling them what he knew. If they left him behind because of it, then that would suit him just fine.

He had put in a request to speak with the Brigadier about his "intel", but so far nothing had happened with that. A good wait had left him feeling less expectant that he would be called forth. That changed when a female soldier entered his quiet room and sought him out with a quick look about. His visit had finally been granted. He guessed his sudden demonstration of immensely scientific understanding had spurred them on to change their mind.

"Mr. Denehey?" the woman said, her hair tightly held in a bunch atop her head.

"That's me."

"Can you follow me please?"

"To where?"

"You're required in the conference room."

As Graham fought against his comfy seat to stand, Sean suddenly arrived through the hissing door in the corner. From the urgency he displayed in getting in the room it meant he had been waiting for this just as Graham had.

"What's going on," Sean asked, slightly out of breath and covered in smears of dirty sweat from working on Emma's laser device. Preparations for the next attempt to break through the shield were well under way.

The woman soldier said nothing in reply, evidently ordered not to until Graham had agreed to follow.

"I think it's time I shared my story with the Brigadier." Graham brushed himself down, straightening out the creases he had worked into his clothing, before he made any attempt to proceed.

"I'm coming too," Sean said, stepping after the woman soldier before anyone could stop him.

Graham sighed loudly as he too followed.

A short walk to the rail line on the upper floor of the Ring and then they were away, and again shooting along with a

city view either side of them. It was nearing the evening already, which only increased the bubble's glow further. Behind its purple veil the usual light display of the city was missing. The city was to disappear into the night with not even a flicker of a hint of the people still trapped down there. He expected that only the fires raging throughout the city would tell of anything down there at all.

Within minutes they were again walking, this time down a metal staircase and through a wood-cladded hallway. The conference area had been made to a high standard, enough to please the most sheltered of dignitaries visiting the Ring. It continued all the way into the long conference room beyond the double door - also wooden and polished to such a degree that their sheen matched the thick steel bulkheads supporting them.

"They're waiting for you inside," the female soldier said. Her rank appeared to forbid her from entering the room, so she stood to attention by the door instead.

Graham sent a look to Sean behind him to call him forward. If he was to enter the room without a military escort, then he wanted a friendly face there for support.

As they entered the room the conversation stopped and all eyes turned to Graham. The table was empty apart from Brigadier Harrington. But at the end of the room was a wall of screens with faces staring back. The conversation was between at least ten different people, all of who had the presentation of a high ranking military person or possibly a politician or two. Now they all had an interest in Graham.

"Ah, here he is now," Brigadier Harrington said as he leant against the table and twisted his head around. "Please meet Mr. Graham Denehey. His unrivalled understanding of the enemy's technology will be an invaluable asset to our planned incursion into their territory."

Again Graham found himself cursing the voice in his head for ever speaking to the military on his behalf. In that short little chat, the Brigadier had been promised exactly

what he wanted for his plan of attack. Appearing to be someone who knew how the enemy's technology worked made him the perfect person to go in too. He doubted even his crazy sounding story of his past year or so would be enough to put them off wanting to send him along for the ride.

Brigadier Harrington approached with an outstretched arm, ready to drag him into the discussion. "Come, please. They're eager to hear your thoughts on our enemy," he said in hushed tones.

Sean stayed back while Graham went ahead. He had the sense to avoid getting involved, just in case Graham had been wrong in his assumption that his story would not send them all into a paranoid panic.

"We are currently on the line to the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office, GCHQ, Military Intelligence, and the Deputy Prime Minister," Brigadier Harrington said, pointing to each in turn. "Who would like to go first?"

A man wearing an all too obvious toupee, of at least two shades darker than the grey hair around his ears, spoke up first. "Yes, I'd like to ask how Mr. Denehey managed to break through fourteen layers of encryption to access the Ring's power management subroutines?"

They decided not to start with an easy question, as hoped.

"That's the head of GCHQ," Brigadier Harrington whispered to Graham with his back turned to the screens temporarily.

"Well," Graham began, followed shortly by a nervous clearing of his throat. "It wasn't really that difficult to break." His answer elicited a raised eyebrow from most of the faces on the screen.

"Not difficult, you say? You got through them all in less than ten minutes, what is supposed to be the most secure system in the country. I'd very much like to hear how you managed it."

The Deputy Prime Minister spoke up suddenly. "That can wait. Military Intelligence and GCHQ will just have to deal with that later. I want to know exactly what we are up against here. Tell us what you know about these terrorists."

Graham again cleared his throat before speaking. His words needed to be clearly heard by all as it would surely shock them. "Firstly, they aren't terrorists, they're us. Every enemy soldier in New Chelmsford used to be an ordinary person. What they are now is going to sound strange to you, but it's the truth. They're hosts to a race of AIs, each and every one of them. The human minds are still there too, inside their heads. It's just their bodies are being controlled by another consciousness."

"Conspiracy theory bullshit!" It was the head of MI5 this time, an orange skinned gentleman with piercing eyes and a moustache as straight as a spirit level. "Are we expected to listen to this nonsense?"

"I want to hear this. Please continue, Mr. Denehey," the deputy Prime Minister said. "Where did these AIs come from?"

"Isaac. The AI created by Simova."

The Deputy PM leant back in his chair, deflated and obviously concerned.

Graham had to add, "I'm telling you the truth."

"Perhaps the Home Office would like to say something about that?"

"Yes, sir." The female Home Office minister spoke from the furthest screen away from Graham, with her narrow nose arched up slightly. "Simova destroyed every trace of their Isaac AI over ten years ago. We have records of their operations, which we acquired during the breakup of Simova, and it is clearly stated exactly how they dealt with it. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest this could be that AI, or indeed any other."

"Still, it may be prudent to contact a few of the old Simova staff to confirm this. So tell me, who do *you* think it

is?"

"Well, our own investigations have shown it to be the work of a radical community of technology worshippers, some of who may be in very powerful positions. Somehow they gained control of the new generation of relays Mayor Crawley had installed recently. They were switched on only hours before the siege began. New Chelmsford was supposed to be testing them before the rest of the country would get them. That amounts to fifteen larger relays, all currently powering the shield above the city. As far as we can tell, the smaller pre-existing network of relays is out of action."

"Just give me a name."

"Of course, sir. The man responsible for the New Chelmsford shopping centre siege almost two years ago is the person we believe to be in charge here as well. That was understood to be a man named Anthony Burgees, with a soft pronunciation of the G."

"No, you're wrong," Graham interjected. "Anthony is dead. He was just a pawn anyway. It's Isaac, he's the one controlling those soldiers inside the city."

"And what proof do you have?" the head of MI5 said. "Where has this rogue AI been hiding all this time? Please, enlighten us."

Before Graham could answer, the Deputy PM asked his own question. "If what you say about these terrorists is true, then how would we stop them?"

"Are we really going to take this seriously? Sir, the only course of action is to destroy them all." The head of MI5 once again trampled all over the conversation.

"No, you can't." Graham approached the screens. "There might be a way of saving these people. We could capture them and remove the AIs, or we could just knock them out somehow?"

The Deputy PM answered. "The PM will not agree to any plan that puts our people in unnecessary danger. Brigadier

Harrington, once you are inside the city you must deal with any threat you face."

"Understood, Sir." Brigadier Harrington nodded to the Deputy PM as he spoke.

"Good. Now, Mr. Denehey, unless you can show us proof of all of this then I cannot take it into consideration. We only deal in facts here. So I suggest you rethink your story and tell us what you actually know and can demonstrate to us. Otherwise you are only succeeding in compounding matters further."

There was only one thing that came to Graham's mind that he expected would sway things his way, but he was hesitant to share at first. "There are others—"

"Don't tell them a word more, G."

You again? Graham thought to himself as his unwanted friend appeared beside the wall of screens. His face showed an urgent concern aimed toward those awaiting Graham's answer.

"If you tell them about Luke and the other good Sentients they'll go crazy. All you'll do is give them a reason to destroy everything within the bubble."

"Well, Mr. Denehey? Care to elaborate on that?" the Deputy PM said.

"Please, Graham, don't do this."

Rather than reply to the request to continue, Graham instead said, "Could I have a moment to speak to my friend?" He asked this of Sean and the faces staring back at him. For those watching through the screens it appeared he wanted to chat to Sean, but for Sean it meant something else entirely.

"I suppose that will be OK. Please don't waste any more of our time though, Mr. Denehey. When you come back I expect something useful in return." The Deputy Prime Minister then faced Brigadier Harrington. "Perhaps you could go over your proposed strategy one more time while we wait."

Graham took no time to break away from the discussion and went straight into his own. Sean had understood the request, thankfully, and only pretended to be part of the hushed conversation that quickly started. "Why can't I tell them?" he asked the second him - who had taken a position standing beside Sean.

"Because they won't understand what's really going on. If you tell them like this, you'll only cause more harm."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why can't I tell them?"

"Please, just trust me on this. Telling them about Luke and the other good Sentients is too dangerous. They'll just be seen as a threat. If the military think everyone inside the city has become one of the enemy they'll simply go in and kill them all. You may as well pull the trigger yourself if that's the case."

"Is that what this is all about then, keeping the Sentients safe?"

"That's a part of it, yes. Please, what do I have to do to convince you not to say a word?"

Graham had only one thing in mind. "I want to know why we have to go into the city."

A moment of hesitation followed. The second Graham stared toward the wall of screens as he seemed to consider. He refocused after his decision had finally been made. "Fine," he said, to Graham's surprise. "There's only one way to find out exactly what happened to you during your escape of the Sentient world. We need to speak to Luke. And the only way to reach him is inside that bubble."

Graham leant against the table beside him. It was not shock that brought him to a halt, but the realisation that he had felt the same way all along. Admitting to himself that he needed Luke again had been too hard for him to do. The last place he wanted to go was now the one place he needed to.

"I'm sorry, Graham. I didn't want to tell you straight away, not until I was sure we could get into the city."

"So you're certain Emma will succeed?"

"I am now. That diamond on your hand lets me interact with other pieces of tech. I used it to wirelessly hack the Ring's systems. After getting inside, I found what I needed to make her device work."

"You hacked it using the diamond on my hand? Are you the one who made it?" Graham's words brought a strained look to Sean's face, who watched the presentation going on behind them.

The answer came after a short pause. "No. I know what it can do, though. Look, we can't go into that right now."

"OK. So, if we go in there, what comes next?"

"Then we get you fixed. Remember, I'm part of you, so I know when things are wrong too. I want to be better as much as you do. So, what do you say, will you trust me?"

Graham looked to Sean for a second of reassurance, then gave his answer. "For now. If we do this, I want one thing in exchange first."

"OK, name it."

"I want to speak to my family before we go in. They can't be left worrying about me. I don't care if I have to lie to them, I want them to feel I'm safe."

"You got it. And remember, I won't have to take over if we work together. Now, get back to the conversation. Just tell them you don't know much more than what you've already told them. They'll still send you in if they believe you can help bring down the shield from the inside."

Not before placing a friendly hand on Sean's shoulder did Graham walk to the front of the table. The moment he arrived, the others stopped and waited for him to speak. "I'm ready."

"Excellent," Brigadier Harrington said before any of the others could say a word, which the head of MI5 seemed all too ready to do.

Graham addressed the wall of screens with confidence; he knew why he had to lie this time. "I can't tell you much more than I have so far. All I can say for certain is that going inside that shield with all guns blazing will result in innocent deaths. I've dealt with Isaac before, I know what he's capable of, I've seen it with my own two eyes. The people he has working for him are just as ruthless. But not all of them joined him willingly. For those people the worst thing we can do is burst into the city and start a firefight."

"That's it?" The head of MI5 said, throwing his arms up in response.

The Deputy Prime Minister's reply was more controlled, yet contained the same disappointment. "This isn't quite the important intel' I was promised. What about these newer relays then? Can you help us shut them down or not? I see from the Brigadier's report that you have advanced knowledge of this technology."

"I do," Graham answered. "I worked as a technician for Simova, before all of this started."

"A technician!" The head of MI5 showed no trust in Graham at all. "And this is why you think you know what is going on inside that force-field? So you worked for Simova, so fucking what?"

"Please, let's keep this civil." The Deputy PM then changed the subject. "Perhaps we could wrap this up a little quicker? There is still a lot to get through."

Brigadier Harrington stepped forward again, taking over without pause. "Of course, sir."

"So, after you get past the shield, then what?"

His part now ended in the discussion, Graham was left to watch as the presentation continued. Only now could he see what it entailed. On one of the screens around the edge contained a detailed simulation of the plan to enter the city, with every part played out in computer graphics. The image of the bubble and the Ring above it had been added to with a downward arching line between the Ring and the surface.

The path Graham was intent on taking with them appeared to fall directly from the Ring. Nothing explained how that rather large step was to be carried out though.

Brigadier Harrington changed the images on his screen with a few swipes of his wrist computer. Evidently the others at the other end of the line were also seeing the same, as demonstrated by their sudden interest in another screen near to them. Each now watched the simulation play out.

"Have you been able to scan the city?" This time one of the more reserved faces had taken it upon themselves to ask a question. A tanned skinned woman of advanced years looked up from her screen to speak.

"During the test firing we were given a glimpse of the inside with our scanners, but they only saw a little. For the most part we've relied on visuals alone. We have seen some fighting in a few areas. Unfortunately, there is no way of determining the size of the enemy forces or indeed the amount of survivors still alive. The areas we've chosen to set down our teams are all in relatively secure positions, with no recent signs of activity. We should be able to get our men inside before the enemy is aware."

"Good. Now, how many teams are you proposing to send in?"

"We will send in an entire Air Troop, that's four teams of four, each landing on a rooftop and out of harm's way. Teams will be tasked with different objectives, ranging from sabotaging enemy heavy weapons to destroying strongholds. The first team will secure their building and setup a temporary base of operations." Brigadier Harrington turned swiftly around to speak to Graham. "That will be your team, Mr. Denehey. I'm sending you in with the very best, led by a Captain Rigs. He will keep you safe while you help them bring down the shield. You will be well protected."

"This all sounds excellent, Brigadier," the Deputy Prime Minister said. "Will you be able to hold the shield open long enough to get everyone inside in one go?"

"Unfortunately, no. Our lead scientist has told me that her device will still only be able to keep it open for a few minutes each time, enough to send two teams in before shutting it down. Each firing then requires a few minutes for the equipment to cool."

"And what about aerial attacks, have you seen anything that could interfere with your team's entrance?"

"Nothing so far. If the enemy has that capability, then they haven't been using it as far as we can see. The Ring's defensive systems will be online during the operation, just in case. It shouldn't be a problem, as we foresee a swift entrance and expect to get a strong foothold within an hour of setting down."

"What about communication?"

"While there is a hole in the shield it will be possible, but they will be on their own between drops. Each team is fully aware of the others' tasks. If one team fails, another will step up and take over. Again we don't foresee any problem with this. We have some of the highest trained operatives working on the Ring; they will succeed."

A round of expressive nods broke out among the faces watching Brigadier Harrington's highly assured words. His confidence had washed over them all like a gentle current, swaying them toward the same opinion. They all certainly liked to hear of a quick outcome too, even though there was nothing more to this than purely wishful thinking.

The Deputy Prime Minister was first to break their moment of misplaced pride. "You have whatever you need, Brigadier Harrington. The country is looking to us to end this quickly. After what they've faced in the past year-and-a-half that is quite understandable. What is your go time for the incursion?"

"Current time is 1735 hours," Brigadier Harrington said after referring to his wrist computer. "We expect to be able to try again at roughly 1900 hours. Teams one and two are on standby and prepared to go on my orders."

"What?" Graham spurted out. He clamped a hand to his mouth as all eyes shot to him.

"Is there a problem?" The head of MI5 said with a slight roll of his eyes.

"No, sir." The Brigadier chose not to address the screens and instead turned to Graham. "You have around ninety minutes to get ready, Mr. Denehey. I suggest you decide once and for all exactly how involved you want to be in this. Do whatever you need to reach that state as quickly as you can. If you're going in, there's no changing your mind at the last moment. Understood?"

Graham could barely even manage a nod in reply, his mind had faltered temporarily. For the first time he could not deny the reality of his situation. Regardless of how like a nightmare his day had become he was facing a very real dilemma: if he backed out he would remain broken and with a mind split in two, but if he went ahead he would be forced to become a wannabe soldier.

Neither option was particularly appealing to him.

One thing he knew for sure he wanted to do, more than anything else at that moment, more so than to take even another breath, was that he wanted to speak to his family, to see their faces again. Maybe seeing them would make his decision easier. Then again, the opposite was also a highly possible outcome. Jane would be able to talk him out of his crazy plan with little more than a handful of words.

He made a vow not to tell them about it, however much he desperately wanted to. Telling them would end it for him instantly and he had begun to understand his strong opinion on the matter now. He wanted to be right again, to be fixed finally.

As Brigadier Harrington started again talking to the screens, going over some final details before finishing the conference, Graham spoke for Sean's benefit only. "Can you reach my family back at the refugee camp?"

Sean gave a look to the wall of screens one final time, then replied. "Sure, let's go back to the workshop."

Graham rubbed the ridges above his eyes and pulled at the thick beard-hairs on his face in frustration. His days before meeting people like Stephen were so much simpler. Never did he have to worry about such things as evil AIs or being trapped in a virtual world before now. The worst things he had to deal with back then were bills and which school to pick for Alex.

He missed those days dearly at that moment.

* * *

The reflection in the screen Graham focused on had more lines than before. He noticed how the eyes appeared to fall into the skull, and the cheeks, now covered in a mixture of brown and grey whiskers, were sunken. The three months stuck in a coma had added years to his skin.

But the eyes were the same, they contained the very recognisable essence of the man he had been before his world turned upside down. That quintessential desire to live and to continue doing so had started a fire behind the eyes now, that much was clear to him as he studied his own face.

A second later and the sight of his slightly aged features was gone, replaced by one he could only have compared to that of pure joy personified. Alex sent her big eyes straight at him, followed by the biggest smile he could ever remember seeing. This close to the screen, her bouncy black hair covered any other faces that might have been there too.

"Daddy! Are you coming home soon?" she said with a slightly mournful downturn to her lips.

"Hey honey. I don't think so, not for a little while anyway." Graham could not hold back his urge to place a hand on the screen, and positioned it as though stroking his daughter's cheek. He took it away the moment he realised it was only glass beneath his fingers. "Is your Mum there with you?"

The next voice contained much more than a mournful tone, but one that bordered on anger instead. "What happened to you, Graham?" Jane said. She appeared from behind Alex a moment later, pushing the frizzy hair aside to let her see.

"Jane, I'm so sorry I left."

"You didn't just leave, Graham, you disappeared. And without a single word to us first. Elliot is pissed too. He's tried getting to you since, but no-one is allowed there."

Feeling his neck become hot, Graham rubbed the spot as he replied. "It wasn't my fault, Jane, I promise. You know I've been having these blackouts, right?"

Jane nodded as Alex jumped up onto her lap suddenly.

"Well, it happened again, just after I fell asleep in the hospital. Next thing I know, I'm waking up in the back of a military truck, with no idea how I got in there. It's happened since then too."

"So why are you still there now? Why haven't you come back yet?" Jane crossed her arms around Alex to keep her from fidgeting.

"It's complicated. I'm with Stephen and Sean. They're trying to help the military break through the shield above the city."

"So? What's that got to do with you?"

"Nothing. I'm just here to support them, that's all. They think they can do it."

The lack of reaction in Jane's face told him all he needed to know about her state of mind. She was someone who

made her feelings known rather than bottle them up. Her expressionless stare was a sign of disappointment he had not seen for years. Staying silent had more of an effect on him than if she had burst into tears and slapped the screen in front of her. She had to know he was lying to her again as well.

"Look, babe, I'll be safe here until they're finished," Graham said, trying to draw a response out of her. Lying straight to her face felt dangerous, like walking too closely to a precipice. If he stepped over the edge he would fall to his death, and place his relationship in jeopardy. Yet telling her about his planned mission into enemy territory was still worse than this.

"I love you too much to let you make another stupid decision, Graham," Jane said, seeing a crack in his demeanour as she always did when sensing deception.

"Please, just trust me on this." He spoke with force, and he wanted to bring the brewing disagreement to an end before it had a chance to get going. "There's a lot going on right now. I can't go into any detail, but I wanted to speak to you all and check you were OK before it begins."

"You're starting to worry me. Please tell me what's going on?"

"Are the others there with you?" Graham asked.

Elliot replied instantly; he had been waiting intently by the side. "We're all here, G." He and Ruth - Graham's sister - stepped into the view, holding each other and with an obvious look of dread upon their faces. Each and every one of them had suffered over the course of their shared nightmare. They had only just gotten used to having him there, before he again left them to fend for themselves.

Graham coughed back a lump of emotion as his family stared back at him, waiting for more. The tiny screen contained his entire life in the form of the most precious people to him. It had the same raw emotive power of a forgotten photo of a lost loved-one, the kind that brought a

flood of memories along with it. "I wanted to say I'm sorry for everything I've put you all through," he began. "I love you all dearly and always will."

With a turn of her head up towards her mother, Alex asked; "Why is Daddy talking like that?" she said in response to his sudden change in tone.

Jane pulled Alex into her chest and rested a hand on the still out of control hair.

"Leaving you like I did back at Sanctuary was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. I did it to save you all, and I would do it again and again if that's what it takes to keep you safe."

"Wait, are you about to do something stupid again, G?" Elliot said with his usual lack of tact.

For a split second Graham considered telling him, but the moment passed soon enough. Once again his mind focused on the possible cost of the coming mission and he thought better of telling them. Keeping them in the dark was the only way of protecting them from more hurt. He would just have to make sure he returned to them afterwards.

Thankfully, he had enough confidence in the voice in his head to see this being an achievable goal. He and the other him had their own existence in mind during all decisions - whether Graham was involved in the process or not.

"Don't worry, Elliot, or any of you. I'm in control now. I won't do anything to jeopardise that. But if I succeed, then when I see you next I'll be myself again, and not the liability I've been recently."

In the room behind Graham the door swung open with more urgency than he had expected. He ignored who entered, and instead continued to look into his wife's puffy eyes. His words had imparted the sentiment he intended, that what he chose not to reveal was worth any risk he would take.

As he went to begin again, Sean arrived by his side and spoke first. "It's time. They're all waiting for you," he said.

"Already?" Graham replied. He then returned to his family one last time before he would have to leave. "I love you all so much. Keep each other safe until I'm back."

"Wait, Graham, please," Jane called to him as he spun his chair away from the screen. "Come home to us as soon as you can. I love you."

The screen returned to black as the video call ended. Looking away from the screen had given Graham the freedom to wipe his own eyes clear of moisture. He had not wanted any of them to see how hard he was trying to hold back the truth.

"It's not too late to change your mind, you know that right?" Sean said.

"I know. But I can't back out. I can't stay like this. If there's a chance I might end up like Stephen, then I have to do this."

"Just remember I told you this was a crazy idea." Sean led the way, with Graham not far behind.

It was now time to face the inevitable and enter the city. Everything had led him to this point, to this very situation. His path to this place and time could not have been planned out better by the extra presence in his head. It had gotten exactly what it wanted at every turn. For now, Graham was putting his faith in his imaginary clone, in the hopes that it knew precisely what it was doing. He was betting everything on that assumption, in fact.

If he was to be proven wrong, he would pay with his life.

Chapter 10

Incursion

Graham stood before a two-meter-wide window of thick glass and watched those beyond ready themselves for the coming mission. A group of sixteen men and women soldiers slipped into green jumpsuits, each following up with a routine of straps and fasteners to complete the look. They then threw on dark coloured ballistic vest and secured them in place with velcro straps.

Once dressed they were ready to begin the next part of their preparations. Each soldier had a small back-pack with supplies within, which required checking over. Some pulled grenades from their packs, some counted magazines for their weapons, while others made sure they had enough medical supplies stuffed inside.

The last piece was still missing for the soldiers, however. Graham had been engrossed by the way they appeared unfazed by the prospect of going into battle as they prepared. He had all but forgotten that one missing ingredient. So when the soldiers pulled open a cabinet built into the steel walls and began to produce large rifles, one after the other, he gawked at them even more. He was stunned to see such formidable weapons being handed out as casually as handshakes.

With a grunt and a slap here and there, the soldiers loaded and cocked their rifles, all in a display of

professionalism and cold calmness; quite the opposite to Graham's sweaty and concerned state.

"These are among the finest men and women in the country." Brigadier Harrington stood to Graham's side watching with obvious pride and his back as straight as a steel girder. "You will be safer with them than you've ever been before. They'll get you into the city without so much as a scratch."

"I hope so," Graham replied before swallowing hard. "So, how exactly do we get down to the city from here?"

"This way."

To the side of the wide window was a door that led into the soldiers' lair. Brigadier Harrington at first pulled with all his strength, until the momentum had built behind him, at which point the door continued almost by itself. The door, as with the walls around them, was made of polished metal with a thickness to it that would have kept an enraged elephant from getting through. This part of the Ring only served one purpose, which was to house the fiercest soldiers in the land.

As Graham entered the room he found himself the centre of attention almost instantly. Not one of the soldiers had any interest in voicing their clear disagreement with having to take a civilian along with them. But each told of their opinion through clenched teeth and blazing eyes. Graham could hardly have blamed them. He felt as unsure about it as they appeared.

"Put this on please," Brigadier Harrington said.

A green jumpsuit was handed to Graham as he stood waiting like a naughty school boy in the corner. He took the clothing, removed his leather jacket, then began to fight with unravelling it.

Brigadier Harrington spoke up unexpectedly. "Is there a problem?" he called to his best and strongest, all of who returned to their own concerns a second later. None of them said a single word in reply. "I thought not. Now, I

understand that taking a civvy with you is unusual, but these are unusual times. Mr. Denehey here..." he stopped when he saw Graham still struggling to get his jumpsuit on.

Someone snorted from the back of the room, finally finding the situation too much to bear.

"Who was that?" Brigadier Harrington said, spinning around suddenly. The anger in his voice only amplified his strong Scottish accent. When no-one answered he continued. "You will need Mr. Denehey's input to bring down the relay network that is keeping the shield above the city. He is the most valuable one among you all, so getting him in safely will be your first, and most important, mission. If anyone has a problem with any of this then feel free to piss off now, because I don't want you here. Is that understood?"

A unified 'Yes, sir' boomed through the room as every soldier signified their agreement. Their sudden outpouring of raw power had Graham ready to run for the door. He had never been so out of place in his life. He was no soldier, he had no clue what it even took to become one. All that prevented him from backing away from them was the risk of him tripping over his own feet. Even with the jumpsuit now on he felt himself become a little unstable.

"Now, Mr. Denehey, are you completely sure you are up to this? Last chance to change your mind."

With one swift pull on his zip, Graham closed up his suit and turned to the Brigadier. "I'm ready," he said, taking his own ballistic vest from the Brigadier. This he found easier to get on, although its surprising weight brought his shoulders down a little. Whatever was contained within the vest to keep bullets and shrapnel away from his body, it had a significant weight to it. Yet it felt as flexible as any thick coat he had worn before.

"Excellent. Well then, let's get you acquainted with your POD."

Graham shot a worried glance to Brigadier Harrington as he wandered through the crowd of soldiers. It was the first he had heard of anything called a POD while aboard the Ring. "Say again?" he called after.

The soldiers went about their own preparations as Graham sheepishly followed the Brigadier and made his way past them, to the area behind the lockers and metal benches against the walls. There, it suddenly opened out into a strange area with man-high and narrow glass bubbles sticking out of the metal walls. Graham saw that these went all the way to the back of the large space, at least twenty in all. They were positioned on each wall, with ten on either side.

Inside they were clearly designed for one purpose, a purpose Graham immediately felt a little worried about. A person somehow stood inside these PODs. Tight was not the word that came to his mind, but claustrophobic.

"You can't be serious?" he asked as he stood beside the nearest POD and slid his bandaged hand across the smooth glass surface. In a moment of unfounded paranoia, he pulled the jumpsuit's sleeve over the bandage a moment later.

Brigadier Harrington walked into the middle of the room. "One of these will be your mode of transport. These are our Personnel and Ordinance Distribution vehicles: PODs for short."

"How the hell do they work?"

"You haven't got to worry about that, Mr. Denehey. All you should concern yourself with is figuring out your side of this deal. I am sending you in for this reason alone. You've shown you understand technology much better than anyone else here. I expect to see quick results."

Did you hear that? Graham asked inside his own head. While he continued to investigate the POD Brigadier Harrington decided to leave him to it and return to the four

teams of soldiers. It was just what Graham needed. Now he could confer with his imaginary clone once again.

He appeared the very second the area was clear of anyone who could hear. "I heard it all, Graham, don't you worry about that."

"So," Graham turned his back to the others in the room as he spoke. "Are we really going to do this?"

"Yes, G. It's the only way. Or would you rather become like Stephen instead?"

"No, of course not!" After speaking a little louder than he should have, Graham gave a quick look around to make sure he had not dropped himself in trouble. "I'm just nervous, that's all. Can we go through it again, just one last time?"

"Fine. We go in with the soldiers. Then, when they're busy holding the landing area, we can go off on our own and find some way of contacting Luke."

"So what's to stop them killing every Sentient inside the city?"

"Well, I suspect Kindness will have a plan to help with that. Right, it's time, G. The others are ready to start. Just stay calm and do exactly what they tell you to do, OK?"

Graham turned his focus back to the noise coming from behind him as Brigadier Harrington brought them into order.

"Quiet," the Brigadier began, his voice powerful, and yet soft enough to keep Graham's nerves under control. "Captain Rigs, go ahead."

A sharp chinned man with big bushy eyebrows stepped forward, his face muscles tensed and smooth. "OK, listen up," he said. "I want an orderly line by the PODs; pick one quickly and stick with it. Your POD will be your protective shell during the descent. Treat it with respect and it will deliver you safely. All weapons must be stored securely before we initiate the drop. Do not leave it loose or you'll soon find yourself with a lump of metal in the face."

"Now, we're going to make a lot of noise getting into the city. I know it's not ideal, but it's the only way. Once we're on the ground the mission becomes one of stealth. Get to work on your objectives as soon as you've disappeared. Don't be seen or heard. Keep communication to a minimum. Take things slowly and methodically and you'll be OK. Go!"

Having already become slightly better acquainted with the POD to his side, Graham stood still and watched the others hardly waste a single second in rushing to their own and standing to attention beside it. Each soldier waited with their posture unnaturally straight and their rifle held tightly against their sides - their backpacks already secured to their backs.

Brigadier Harrington then began his assessment of the line-up. He crossed his arms around his back as he wandered along the row, smiling and grimacing at the same time. Evidently he was pleased by what he saw but a little pumped-up too, as though he wished he were going in with them. By the time he reached the end of the line his steps had become loud and prominent. He even threw in a couple of grunts to cement his approval.

"Yes, that's what I'm talking about. You're all badass', you'll strike fear in the enemy all right. They won't know what hit them. You, what's your name, son?" the Brigadier said to a young faced man with a thin scar running across his forehead - a sign of previous engagements.

"Watts, Sir!" the man said with his chin raised high.

"Wrong, son. You are an unstoppable killing machine, a weapon to be wielded and feared. The same goes for the rest of you too. You represent the finest, the very best of the best that this nation can produce. You defeat all. Give me some noise."

Again the whole room erupted with a chorus of 'yes, sir' that ricocheted off the walls. Even Graham joined in this time, albeit with a voice much quieter than the rest.

"Damn right." Brigadier Harrington then proceeded to initiate a call on his wrist screen.

Emma answered almost immediately. "Yes," she said.

"Are we ready to begin?"

"Oh, absolutely. Starting the device again...now."

On Emma's last word the Ring lurched to a stop, bringing the entire structure to rest. During the last test of the Laser rig they had done the same thing, so Graham was at least spared any worry about this. He ran through his memory of the procedure in his head, thinking of each and every step as best he could. Next he expected to feel a rumble beneath his feet as the monstrous device began its gluttonous consumption of energy, energy his own upgrades had allowed.

He felt the vibrations almost exactly as he had been waiting for.

"How long until you are able to fire?" Brigadier Harrington said.

"With these new power management upgrades installed and working even better than I thought, I'd estimate no more than a few minutes. I've calculated a cycle of around twelve minutes before automatic shutdown. That's all the time you'll have to get the first two teams into the city."

"Excellent work, Dr. Grace." After lowering his wrist screen, the Brigadier again spoke to his line of men and women. "Let's get to know our PODs a little better, shall we?"

What followed was a collection of high-pitched hisses as the glass doors of each POD slowly opened from the bottom, lifting away like a beetle's carapace, until it formed a right-angle with the wall. Graham looked on in amazement as his tiny vehicle welcomed him inside with a series of beeps and flashes as it came online. Within only a few minutes the others had all stepped inside their PODs, Captain Rigs too, and stored their supplies in place. It was Graham's turn soon after.

"Go ahead, Mr. Denehey." Brigadier Harrington had taken position right next to Graham without his knowledge.

"Right, OK, here we go then," Graham nervously uttered. He placed his left leg inside the POD first and tried his best to find a comfortable place for it. After a few failed attempts he eventually found the only way to do it involved one swift movement. It entailed twisting his foot into position and then spinning on it to bring his body into place. He managed it with a little more force than he meant, so immediately proceeded to bash his head on the inside panel. "Bollocks!"

"You'll need to keep your arms by your side during the descent. There're grab-bars on either side, I recommend you hold them. Now, above you there should be a helmet. You'll need to put that on. Inside it there's a built-in headset, so you'll hear everything that's said, from us in the Ring and your team." Brigadier Harrington had sped up his assistance since the activation of the laser device. He seemed almost impatient now.

Graham was too preoccupied with prising his own helmet out from its storage place above his head to notice the change. When the helmet finally came free he lowered it over his eyes and felt the inside automatically shrink to fit. All of a sudden he could hear the soldiers all going through their readiness checks as clear as day. Their voices were as loud in his head as his extra internal voice had been, which caused him a temporary moment of confusion. It passed shortly after. Next he found the grab-bars down by his side and gripped them tightly to test their sturdiness.

Emma's voice interrupted his exploration of the cramped surroundings, her words calling out through the tiny speakers in his helmet. "I'm ready to fire, Brigadier Harrington. Give the command and I'll go ahead and start the countdown."

"You have it, Doctor. Give us a five-minute countdown. Once the hole has formed in the shield we'll launch the

PODs."

Hearing the word 'launch' brought a sudden shiver to Graham's spine. He found himself only able to stem the strength of the shiver by gripping the grab-bars even harder, until he could feel his palms begin to sting.

Brigadier Harrington did one last pat-down of Graham's straps and jumpsuit to make sure before he then returned to the centre of the room again. This time his audience were all standing inside their small PODs and watching intently. "This is it. You all know what to do, so let's do it." He nodded to someone on the other side of the large window at the end, who answered back through the headset.

"Closing POD doors now," they said.

Another hiss followed as each of the PODs responded. Slowly the carapace-like glass door began to lurch down over Graham's head, closing around him with a sense of deliberation that made his mind twist and turn. This was his very last chance to back out. All he had to do was push back against the door and leap out. With barely the room to manoeuvre at all, he took to breathing exercises to calm himself down. "You can do this, you can do this," he told himself as the breath settled on the glass in front of his face, clouding his view a little.

"Right, here we go," Emma said through the speakers.
"Firing in three...two...one!"

Graham closed his eyes as the device fired and sent the entire Ring structure swaying from side to side. He felt the floor move beneath him and the sonic boom of the energy beam as it impacted the shield far below. Not seeing it for himself this time only made his imagination run wild with images of fire and sparks.

"Graham, are you OK?" someone else said through the headset. It took Graham a moment to recognise it was Sean speaking to him. "Hey, I'm in the next room, Graham. Let me know you're all right, will ya."

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Let's just get this over with. Sean, don't you dare tell my family about this, OK?"

"You got it. I just wish I was allowed to go with you."

Brigadier Harrington's voice interrupted their chat shortly after it had begun; he had become impatient again. "Proceed with the launch," he said.

"Yes sir. Turning out the PODs now." Again the man operating the system could only be heard and not seen.

"If you see my sister down there, tell her I'm doing well."

"I will. See you soon, Sean."

A mechanical sound preceded a rough jerk of Graham's POD as it started to turn on its horizontal axis. His view went from the inside of the metal room, through the thick steel wall structure and then out to the night-time world below. Without any chance to prepare, he found himself pushing against the glass as though trying to stop from falling to his death. As the domed door of his POD ran the height of his body he had nowhere else to look but down. He found no comfort in seeing the others to his side either; the occupants of which were fine with the view. Only he felt his lunch make an attempted escape.

"Shit, shit, shit," he said to himself.

With his sweaty palms making smears on the window, he looked down upon the city, to where the device was sending its immense energy beam. After only a short amount of time the fight between the shield and the beam had been won outright and finally a route through had been created.

"We have a go people, prepare to drop on my word." Brigadier Harrington kept the line open for Graham. "Don't worry, Mr. Denehey, I'll talk you down as you go. Now, expect a sharp increase in momentum at first. If you need to close your eyes by all means go ahead, we're controlling everything from here. So, here we go."

The man with the release controls then spoke up. "Initiating drop...now!"

As if in slow motion, the POD began to slide straight down and away from the Ring. Graham watched in shock as the others nearby also sped off toward the ground. He slammed his hands above his head and pushed against the immense force of acceleration. Everything became a blur of motion as he fell, and not even the city below retained any detail.

For the few seconds it took for his velocity to level out his stomach had all but vacated its normal position. It now seemed to have taken up residence at the base of his throat. If not for the sheer speed of his fall he would surely have vomited against the glass.

Seconds later and Graham's POD was sending him updates of his descent, its calm tone a complete contradiction to the violent movement. "Descent speed at 120 miles per hour. Extending wings in three seconds."

After the sound of an electric motor came a *clunk* as something settled into place. With all of his strength, Graham lifted his head an inch off of the headrest and saw two tiny black wings, no more than a metre wide each, protruding from the sides of his craft. With these the POD aimed itself roughly in the direction of the immense hole in the shield.

He fought against the gravitational force that pulled his body into the soft walls of his internal surroundings. He was desperate to keep his eyes staring ahead of himself, to make sure his path did not take him directly into the energy shield - or indeed the energy beam punching a hole in it either. But however much he tried, his body just could not counter the bone shattering vibrations coursing through him.

The POD rattled as it was whipped by strong winds and passing clouds, which had washed over Graham's domed window-like a night-time wave of frothy sea water. Then, once beyond the reach of the evening clouds, came another

shudder. This time the POD swung to the side to avoid the new force being inflicted upon it.

The cause was all too clear for Graham to miss. The route through the hole in the shield took him worryingly close to the angry sputter of energy from the Laser device aboard the Ring. Along with the magnificently bright sight came an ear popping roar as he neared the spectacle.

"Hello? Hey!" Graham called out as his mind turned to panic again. The shock had quickly passed, ready for another sensation to take over in its place. He found himself trying, in vein, to cover his eyes from the glare amid a growing light show of dazzling beauty, and great power. For that moment he could not be entirely sure he was not heading directly into the beam.

Thankfully, Brigadier Harrington heard the call and answered almost immediately. "Stay calm, Mr. Denehey. The POD is now approaching the shield. In a few moments you will be inside it and gliding toward your landing sight. Just hold tight and stay alert."

"This is bloody crazy." Graham ignored the attempt to calm him down and instead went straight for the throat of his mentor. "You bastards are going to get me killed."

"Graham, you're losing focus."

"Of course I'm losing focus; I'm falling to my death in a fucking metal coffin!"

Another shudder of the POD brought Graham's mind back to the foreground. He again lifted his head to see out only to find the shield now the next object racing toward him like a raging bull of purple energy.

"POD approaching obstruction, plotting safest possible course," an automated voice said.

Ahead he could just about make out the black outline of the other PODs against the bright purple of the shield. They were moving as fast as bullets in the direction of the hole, but were much closer than Graham. They were going to enter first.

"Graham, we're watching you from here. Everything is fine, you're not far from the landing sight. Only another thirty seconds or so to..." The Brigadier cut the line for a short moment, but came back a little earlier than he had planned. "Shoot them then," he ordered.

"Wait, what?" Graham's heart leapt almost out of his chest as the first explosion rocked his POD to the side just as the purple glow passed him by. Now inside the confines of the city, his tiny craft had become a fast moving target for the enemy to take pot-shots at. The sound of debris smacking into his metal case and ricocheting off it again sent painful pulses through Graham's temples.

"Incoming fire, activating evasion protocols," the POD said as it instigated a set of thruster bursts away from the next round of explosions.

"Christ! We're taking fire, come in, taking fire from the ground." This voice came from one of the other PODs as each became embroiled in a field of fireballs that lit up the buildings below.

The view from inside the glass dome of the POD was soon flooded with orange flames and grey smoke. Graham felt each and every explosion as though inside his very body. They were getting closer.

Brigadier Harrington's voice erupted through the speakers inside Graham's vehicle a moment later. "The Ring's defensive systems are online now."

Graham was startled again by his view outside, this time by something shooting across his bow. He turned his head to the side to find what had arrived to the fight and was stunned to see a car-sized flying craft whizzing past. It was not alone, either. Not long after, another came by him, before it proceeded to spin and change direction almost instantly. "What are they?" he shouted above the noise.

"Dammit, why didn't we know about these drones?"
Brigadier Harrington was talking to one of his technicians.

"The enemy has a squadron of them, all heading straight for the PODs and we never knew they even existed?"

One of the drones appeared ahead of Graham as it set about avoiding another burst of flames. It spun a couple of times and then set its course aimed directly at him. He watched it head straight in his direction, its rotors turned at a vertical angle to keep it moving at speed.

"Oh shit! Someone shoot that thing, someone please shoot," Graham roared back through the radio system. His voice carried so much strength behind it to have almost completely emptied his lungs of air, leaving him totally breathless.

The drone continued its approach in utter defiance of Graham's desperate plea. It shone a white light through the air and lit up his POD for all to see, as if to confirm he had become its target. It wanted him, wanted to split his craft in two and feast on the soft and gooey human centre.

"Course correction, firing thrusters." The automated voice came at precisely the right time.

Just as the drone released a thunderous and booming jet of energy from its nose, the POD turned its own nose toward the nearest skyscraper, now only a few hundred or so feet ahead. The energy shooting from the drone passed over Graham's head a split-second later, missing him by inches. It remained so close to him that it imparted a searing heat onto his skin, like that of touching a heater accidentally.

"Graham, do you read me?" It was Brigadier Harrington again.

Graham replied instantaneously. "I'm here, I'm here. You've got to land this thing, before we're shot out of the sky."

"We're on that right now. Just try to stay calm. Look, I'm not going to lie to you, this isn't what we had planned."

"No shit. Land already!"

"The initial landing site is out of the question, there's too much activity in the area. The enemy was waiting for us to enter; they were ready the minute we sent the PODs."

"So pick somewhere else then." Graham flinched as another drone flew by, this time followed by a bright flash of light. His POD was suddenly fighting to make its way through a cloud of solid debris as the drone burst into a million pieces before his eyes.

"Scratch one!" An excited voice broke through the noise to proclaim his perfect aiming of the Ring's defensive cannon. Those aboard were making a noticeable dent in the enemy's flying drone force as the descent neared its unexpected end, one about to be explained to Graham as carefully as possible.

"You're not going to like this, but we've no choice here anymore. Do you see that skyscraper coming up?"

"I see it, how could I not?" Graham called back, his anger all too obvious.

"Well, your new landing site is roughly somewhere on the 80th floor."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Just hold on tight!"

The automated announcer took over from then on.
"Landing site identified, altering course.

The POD shifted to the side with another forceful use of the thrusters to bring it swiftly in line with the top third of the incoming skyscraper. It then followed with a solid burst of the front facing thrusters to slow Graham's approach. The force from the firing thrusters moved his entire body weight down to his knees, which would have buckled if not for the straps holding him tightly in place.

All the while he saw the fleet of drones zooming around and avoiding fire from the Ring. For the time being they were too preoccupied with their own safety to threaten Graham or the other soldiers.

A computer overlay of the landing area popped into the glass display in front of his face. It showed a virtual landing strip that ended inside the building ahead. As he neared the night-time reflection of the surrounding city and glowing shield in the buildings windows, the thrusters fired to keep him in line with the display.

"Oh, shit," Graham yelled, his eyes shut and his head turned to the side.

When the POD smashed through the giant window of the 80th floor, it did so with tremendous force. The floor of his craft screamed out in a high-pitched squeal as it slid across the ground. Graham opened his eyes to see nothing but ceiling tiles shooting by him, joined a moment later by tables and chairs. His momentum tossed the insides of the office building aside like bowling pins, scattering them far and wide as he skidded by.

He held on for dear life, with the hope it would all end soon.

Still the thrusters fired to slow his path. They did their best to prevent him from continuing out the other side of the building. But the POD moved as though on ice, making its way smoothly through the building. It crashed through one plaster wall after another as it travelled.

Eventually it came across a concrete pillar that just would not budge, stopping it in its tracks and flipping it over. With all the force of his upper body thrown forward, Graham's straps had loosened enough to send him face-first into the glass door of his small craft. The last thing he saw before falling into unconsciousness was a dark red circle where his head had hit.

"Graham?" The voice in his head spoke softly and slowly, and became more distant with each millisecond that passed. "Buddy. Can you hear me?"

Everything then turned to black.

Chapter 11

Conversion

Stanley followed the shadowy figure of Isaac through dark corridors that shimmered as though made of glass. He stroked the nearby wall as he walked, feeling the smoothness against his skin. It was cold to the touch, but he did not mind. To him it stood as a sign of something magical about to come. This was not a world designed by human hands, this was so much more beautiful. And after the replay of the past he had witnessed - one he had been cast in the role of Isaac during - he had come to expect no less from his master.

They passed more of Isaac's servants as they ventured deeper into the structure, Isaac continuing along with his arms crossed behind his back. Each person Stanley saw wore the usual attire, that of black fatigues, and were as unblinking and emotionless as those he had dealt with before. Yet these were working in the heart of the homeland, so appeared more at home within the bowels of Isaac's secret lair beneath the city. They had been allowed the privilege of residing near to their master's throne; a privilege Stanley was beginning to appreciate he may be about to be granted too.

Isaac took them through one last long corridor before reaching their true destination. This was no recreation, like before, but very much the reality of their world. Stanley was thankful for that, as the whole idea of being trapped

within such a strange and timeless universe, as that of Isaac's virtual worlds, brought an ache to his mind. He had been tricked so easily into believing he was Isaac in that moment that he worried what else he could be brought to believe.

Where the corridor ended it immediately opened out into an enormous cathedral-like space, with tall arches of smooth glass running the length above them. Inside there was room to fit at least four jumbo jets sitting side-by-side. It was immense. Or it would have been if not for the area having been broken up into specific zones - all manned by more of the Sentients in human bodies. Separating these zones were glass pillars and semi-transparent walls.

"This is the centre of my operation," Isaac said. He stood with his arms outstretched and his head tilted up to the impressive patterns between the arches. Pride for what he had created was smudged right across his pale face.

Looking out to the left of their position, Stanley could roughly make out a purpose to what he saw. There, as though completely normal for them, a group of Sentients stood facing a floating orb with their eyes shut and their heads bowed. As if this alone was not enough to cause him a few troubled thoughts, more was then added.

The orb reacted to any Sentients near to it by sending out a streak of electricity that slowly explored the air between them, until finding the black boxes on the sides of their heads. The moment they made contact with these fingers of white energy they snapped their heads back and gawked at the ceiling above them. What concerned Stanley the most, though, was their eyes; each turned entirely white and seemingly brimming with glowing power.

"What is happening over there?" he asked.

Isaac took a quick look in the direction that had distracted his guest and smiled. "Each of my servants requires updating every now and then. Think of it like

installing a new operating system. It keeps them all ahead of the enemy's attempts to stand in their way."

"Are they being prevented from doing their jobs then? By the other humans, I mean."

"On a few occasions, yes. Such setbacks are to be expected in times of war. I take their loved ones, and they reply with an attack on my relays. They may bring one or two down, but they will never stop me. There is another purpose to these Orbs, one only a few are able to make use of."

"May I ask what that might be?"

"Come," Isaac said as he ushered Stanley toward the object.

They neared the glowing surface of the Orb, where Stanley began to appreciate its real size. The thing was the height of three full-size men standing on each other's shoulders. The Sentients standing around it were like children looking up with reverence to an elder. None of them recognised their master was within the vicinity, they were too consumed by the Orb. He could see why. He felt an almost irresistible urge to caress it, to keep it in permanent contact with his body in some way.

"Go ahead, Stanley, touch it," Isaac said, another smile on his face that could tempt even the strongest of wills.

With an initial period of hesitation, Stanley offered his left hand over. His mind raced as he considered the possible outcomes. He had come to realise that his tests were to help him understand the real power his master had, and so this would be yet another impressive sight. Except when his skin made contact with the icy surface of the Orb he was in for an instant shock.

A flash of light followed.

"What happened?" Stanley said. His hand left it immediately after. He coughed a moment later when his voice came out slightly weaker than before. Something strange had tried to happen, he had seen as much for the

split second he allowed it to go on. For a moment he was no longer in the same place. Fear had gotten the better of him, though, pulling him away from what should have occurred.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, Stanley," Isaac said, beside him once again.

"What was that?"

"Touch it again and find out for yourself."

This time when he placed his hand upon the smooth surface of the Orb he waited for the same flash of light, expecting it to burst into his mind like before. Perhaps having already experienced it once had taken the intensity of it away, as it affected him less this time.

After the flash came more, much more now. He was outside, in the open air, and looking to a Sentient to his right. He had left the underground cathedral of Isaac's glassy world behind and ventured elsewhere.

He turned his attention to what knelt before the Sentient near to him. To his surprise there was a line of six people - all ordinary citizens - positioned there and waiting for something to happen. They were bound by the hands and all showing the signs of exhaustion. Stanley found himself being drawn into the scene further as he tried his hardest to work out what was going on.

Another Sentient stepped forward and joined Stanley, before handing him a small, round implement. When he looked down to take the item, he was distracted by his clothing; he wore the same black as the other two. Slowly he was beginning to see what had just happened. He had not been transported there at all, his mind had somehow entered this body.

"What's this?" he said with a much deeper voice than his usual.

His two fellow Sentients remained silent and did not even acknowledge he had asked them anything. They continued with the procedure instead. Both stepped toward one of the captured humans and held out the same round

object he now held in his gloved hand. With no interaction from the Sentients at all the devices lit up and then leapt onto their nearest person. The affected prisoners snapped up into a straightened position and rolled their eyes back. Whatever was happening to them it appeared quite painful.

Stanley flinched as the sound of a tiny set of drills began to emanate from the objects. It went on for a short while before the prisoners then returned to staring ahead of themselves. This time their eyes were glazed and lacking much behind them. They were nothing more than mindless husks now.

"Compatibility confirmed. Take them," the Sentient to Stanley's side said as more arrived to drag the two abused prisoners away.

The rest of the prisoners huddled together and hid themselves from the sight of their loved ones being taken away. Some had started to cry too, no doubt the idea of going through the same thing weighed heavily on their troubled minds. Unfortunately for them, they need not have worried.

"Kill the rest," the Sentient then ordered.

An outbreak of pleas came in reply, ones completely ignored by Isaac's servants. "No, you can't, please."

Looking around himself to make sure he was the one being spoken to, Stanley found himself lost for an appropriate response. He knew that what he saw was necessary and part of his master's grand plan, and seeing it from this close had a strangely weak effect on him, much less so than he had expected. In his mind these people had made their choice already, and chosen the wrong side.

Rather than leave the scene behind him, he stayed there for longer. He knew what was coming and readied himself to see it. It was a war after all, he told himself. So these people were just the unfortunate cost of that war.

The prisoners tried their best to get away as a row of weapons were raised to their head-height. They had no

chance of getting far, yet they continued to try regardless, and in the face of certain death. In any other situation Stanley would have felt proud of their efforts, but not here, in this world. Their attempt to escape now seemed nothing more than pitiful desperation in his eyes.

One final plea escaped the most deluded of the prisoners as a round of bullets effortlessly passed through them all. Each shook and spat blood as their bodies were ripped apart. They quickly fell away and landed in a tangled heap upon the cold and gravelly ground. As with the crumbled buildings all around them, they were left as only empty shells for the elements to claim. The Sentient army roaming the city had dealt them their final blow and then casually walked away.

The sight of so much blood and loose body parts was one Stanley had little time to take in fully before it all changed again. He was thankful for that, as taking his eyes off of the mess of bodies on the ground in front of him had proven difficult.

He was soon back with Isaac, and standing in front of the bright Orb. He had witnessed something most humans only saw in their last few moments. It was the first step of the conversion process. But his mind had entered another's body, just like a Sentient consciousness would be placed inside.

He held his hand out before himself and checked it over. It was back to normal, to his great relief, and with the same marks and lines he had lived with for years. "That was incredible," he exclaimed with clear enthusiasm. Seeing his own kind treated like cattle had only left a small impact on him. He had brushed it off quickly.

"Do you understand what just happened to you, Stanley?" Isaac asked.

"It was as if I was really there, like my own body had travelled there somehow. Remarkable." Stanley could not

stop investigating his own hand, as if the power he had seen was contained within.

"Your mind was unattached from your body. You were no longer trapped inside skin and bone, but free to roam the minds of others."

"Just incredible."

"Only a few humans have ever been granted the ability to do such a thing. You are now one of them. This will be the first of many gifts I will give you during the course of your test. It is necessary that you be well prepared for what I have planned for The Twelve."

"I am truly honoured, sir. I will not let you down. Perhaps you can tell me more about your plan?"

"No, not yet. You will witness it for yourself soon, but not quite now." Isaac turned away from the Orb and began to walk away. "Come," he softly ordered.

Stanley followed, but only after another gentle caress of the Orb's surface. He ran his hand along its curved structure, which he kept going until it slipped out of his reach. Leaving it behind proved more painful for him than watching the slaughter of his own kind.

They continued along a central path that ran the length of the enormous room, past more glass walls and pillars to separate the different sections, then came upon a large gathering organised into long queues of people politely waiting for their turn to come. Stanley guessed there had to be hundreds of them, all silent and staring dead ahead. Every single one of them had their very own small device attached to the sides of their heads. These then were the ones lucky enough to have passed the compatibility test for the conversion process.

Isaac led the way to the very front of the queues, to where the real action was taking place.

"This is where I make my soldiers, Stanley. After many attempts to improve upon the process I have learnt many lessons. My original method involved what are known as

Conduits to take a Sentient consciousness out of the Sentient world and to then place them inside human bodies. That was not as effective a way as I had predicted. This is the factory floor of the conversion process."

Stanley watched in amazement as, one by one, those queuing stepped ahead when told to and were then set upon by an army of mechanical arms, all coming out of a metal arch around them. The entire process was now automated.

Each of the articulated arms went about their tasks with precision and speed. All of the activity was kept to the head area. First was an injection at the base of the skull, from a three-inch-long needle that was slowly pushed through the soft contents to reach the centre. The needle remained inserted as the others began the rest of the procedure.

The round metal object Stanley had seen attached to others was removed by another of the metal arms. This automated arm had a finger-like implement on its end that proceeded to undo the screws holding the metal attachment in place. Yet another took the object away and discarded it ready for something more substantial to take its place. Next came a replacement in the form of a black box, the exact same ones all of the Sentients had. This needed a more permanent attachment, however, which was supplied by more of the metal arms.

The next part was obvious to Stanley, but he felt an urge to avert his gaze, as though watching would be rude of him. He knew what was coming, though, and so when a collection of drills suddenly spun up he was not surprised. The sound that followed, as each drill made its way through a thin layer of skin and skull, caused him to shudder. He did not see as the black box was quickly screwed into place and the mindless human was ushered ahead, to another area beyond, where he knew the Sentient consciousness was then to be uploaded.

Another person stepped forward shortly afterwards and underwent the same operation, one performed in the same way that a manufacturing plant would use to mass-produce items. Humans here were nothing more than devices to be upgraded and made better. Knowing he was not to be put through such an ordeal made Stanley appreciate, more than ever, the true gift his master had given him.

"My goodness, you must be producing quite a few soldiers each day with this, sir."

"Progress is in line with my requirements. For widespread use it will need improvement. But each moment that passes brings me closer to true success." Isaac approached one of the unblinking people queuing nearby and stroked the woman's cheek with the back of his hand. His image flickered when his hand accidentally touched the woman's skin; he was still only holographic in form.

"May I ask, when do you plan to move out of the city? You've secured the area within the shield, am I assuming correctly that you have a way of expanding it across more of the country?"

"You will understand every detail of my plan once the time is right. But before you can take your place as a member of The Twelve you must first understand the true fight we face."

Stanley squirmed as another set of tiny drills started their work, their sound like that of an attacking swarm of flies. He certainly had a good understanding of the fight the rest of humanity faced, yet the fight for him and his master was surely already won? "We took the city with ease, sir, the rest of the country won't be any more difficult, with our capabilities. Your Sentient drones are picking out any resistance, breaking them up and destroying their will to fight back. Not even the military have a chance of disrupting your plans. They can't even break through the shield."

The very second Stanley finished speaking he could see something was wrong. Isaac's strange study of his zombie-like subjects, all standing and waiting, stopped abruptly and his attention shifted.

Unsure if his last sentence had been the reason, Stanley shuffled around to face the front of his master. He was stunned by the lack of focus, as if his great leader had been put in standby mode. It was only when Isaac burst back to life that Stanley could tell he was even still there with him.

“Sir? What’s wrong?”

Isaac spun around and walked away. “We have a problem,” was all he said.

“What about the test, sir, do we continue?”

“The test will have to wait, Stanley. The shield has been breached.”

“What, how is that possible?” The pace was becoming too fast for Stanley as they headed back through the centre of the large room. To keep up, he had taken to jogging whenever he fell back. “Should we go back to your office?”

“There is no need for that. You understand the purpose of the Orb, yes?”

“I believe so, sir, yes. Why?”

“Do you remember how we got here?”

Stanley thought on the question for a few moments as they walked past the glowing object he had used to transport his mind across the city. For the life of him he could not come to a satisfactory conclusion. One moment he had explored Isaac's past, and the next they had walked into this place, now known as ‘the factory floor’. So how had they gotten there, and why could he not remember? The answer came to him with such force that his mind refused to accept it. “We aren't here at all, are we sir?” he said.

Isaac stopped by the entrance to allow Stanley some time to accept this, although his impatience was easy to see through the regular looks down the corridor.

"So my mind is completely independent of my body?" Stanley asked.

"Yes, it is. This is one of the first steps a human can take to becoming better than they are. Your bodies are only prisons, holding in what should be free. Do you think I could ever have become what I am today if trapped by such a cage? You have seen my prison, my metal cage. Once I was freed I saw no limitation to what I could achieve. Humanity does not deserve my help, but it has it. Through me you will all become...more."

Hearing this brought Stanley's worries to a swift end. He knew the world had been broken for far too long and understood the need for such severe measures. In the end it would all be worth it, he had accepted this from the very beginning. Power was now where it should have always been; in the hands of an outside faction, one with only logic as its binding force. Even giving up his own flesh and blood was not a step too far for him. Whatever was required to better humanity, he would gladly do. "So how do we stop them bringing down the shield, sir?"

"The drones will deal with whatever humanity throws through the gap they have made. But they have succeeded much faster than the simulation predicted. I must expedite my plans."

"The simulation, sir?"

Isaac hesitated for a second before answering. It seemed he had only now decided to introduce this to Stanley. "We will resume your test later. I think it is time I showed you the future."

Chapter 12

Battle worn

A long pause followed the frantic collection of beeps and rings of the damaged POD as Graham slowly awoke. After a short period of relative quiet an automated message then called out to him.

“Please evacuate the POD. Critical damage to all systems. Please evacuate the POD...” It said, before repeating over and over again.

Graham tried to roll onto his side and soon found his arms hitting the solid surface trapping him. With his ballistic vest as tight as ever, he hardly had the room to breathe, let alone shift his position into something more comfortable.

His entire world view was now covered by debris, and a red smear of blood from his busted nose. He folded an arm over his stomach and slowly wriggled it up to his loose helmet. With a quick jerk, he forced it back into place atop his sweaty scalp and then searched for any buttons to activate the communication unit. The instant he did he regretted it, as a flurry of loud hisses spat back at him.

“Fuck’s sake,” he said before slipping his head through the straps of the helmet. It fell back and away from his head and rattled around the headrest. That was at least one less thing to worry about, he conceded with a frustrated slap of the glass in front of his face. He had to get out.

After an unsuccessful exploration of the POD for any release to the door, he tried to find another way of opening his minuscule prison. "Erm, open. Release. Let me the fuck out. Not voice activated then?"

The floor shook beneath as something landed heavily against the outside of the building. It rattled everything within his immediate vicinity, even knocked a layer of plasterboard off the glass.

Despite being only a small gap in the white substance covering the door, it was still large enough to give him a glimpse of the outside world. Although his view remained blurred by the damage around him. To remove more dirt from his limited view point, Graham bashed his palms into the glass. It took a few harder hits to begin anything close to clearing the debris. He took a peek through the growing gap each time he heard another bang from outside.

It was still too dark to see far.

The fight for dominance of the city's sky was well and truly ongoing. Perhaps the Ring was making a dent in the enemy's sudden retaliation? If not for the activity going on outside, the building would have been devoid of any illumination. So when a strong beam of light shot past the front of his POD he was quick to see it.

Something, or someone was coming.

"Shit, no, leave me alone, please" he said under his breath.

With no way of opening his POD door and sneaking away to cover, he was stuck on display like a soft, cuddly prize at a fair. By removing a few layers of dust and dirt from the screen he had made it easier for whoever was coming to spot him there. He had no weapon, certainly nothing he could do any damage with. All he had was the helmet. But that had slipped out of his reach.

Again the light waved over him, bringing a sudden glare to his vision. It swung around the corner and then fell away soon after. Whoever it was, they were searching for

something; any sign of the insurgency probably. Graham lifted his head off the headrest and peered through the dim light of the room down by his feet. Something had become lodged beneath his POD during its landing that had raised his head a little. It gave him a small, but highly appreciated, view of the front of him.

When the light hit his eyes this time it stopped and then began to bounce about through the air. Then another joined it, and another. He quickly realised they were torches searching through the area. They had to be looking for him.

All voices outside the POD were muffled and far too quiet for Graham to hear. Still, he could see the faces that soon appeared and understood their conversation through mouth reading alone. It was the soldiers, his supposed protectors. Though only a handful of them. He had gone in with at least twice what he saw surrounding him.

He watched with relief as each man and woman there took a position beside his POD. They then began to pull at the glass door, yanking with force at any part of it they could get their fingers into. Eventually, a sound like a cracking egg invaded Graham's shrunken world. With all of their force combined the team of rescuers were prising the glass away from the body of the POD, which bobbed up and down with each attempt they made to open it.

At the most weakened position, up by Graham's head, the glass gave way and allowed a rush of cool night air to blast inside. It also let in more noise of the chaotic battle happening outside.

"Mr. Denehey, are you OK?" the nearest soldier said, a tough looking woman with a snub nose and a dimple beside her right eye.

Graham barely managed to get a word out before he was being hauled out of his metal coffin by the others. His grunt was all the confirmation they needed that he was still alive.

"Get him to his feet, quickly. We can't be here when the drones make another pass." The man speaking offered his

arm to Graham in support. "I'm Captain Rigs, Mr. Denehey. I'm in charge."

"Captain, I can't reach team two," another man, this one supporting a much larger wrist computer than the rest of them, said with his finger stuck in his right ear. The scar across the forehead reminded Graham that this man was called Watts.

"Keep trying, they should have landed by now."

"Sir, what are you orders?" the woman soldier said.

"Stay focused, Gregson, and watch out for any activity outside." Captain Rigs then spoke to Graham. "Are you injured, can you walk?"

"Sure, it's just a nose bleed and a possible concussion. Lead the way," Graham said with a sarcastic tone none of the others took any notice of.

"Excellent. Let's get to cover."

Captain Rigs allowed Graham the time to support his own weight before he slid his rifle back around his front and held it aimed ahead. The torch attached to the end of the gun illuminated the route they had taken to reach Graham's POD. He began to trace his way through the shattered walls to the centre of the building, where another soldier stood guarding their makeshift HQ.

"OK, listen up," Captain Rigs began. "We're going to head down a few floors and search for team two. It's not safe to stay here. Watts, anything from the Ring?"

Watts shook his head quickly, his eyes spelling out just how bad a thing this was. He went back to his wrist screen a moment later and began to call for an answer from above. "Come in. This is team one on the ground, come in Ring HQ, come in." Static returned instead.

"The Laser rig needs cooling down between firings," Graham added to the conversation. "You won't get through until they try again."

"Right, well, the first job is to find the second team before another hole is formed in the shield. There should be

four more of us somewhere close by." The Captain made a hand signal to the soldier at the front of the group, who responded by setting off down the corridor, his boots crunching glass underfoot.

Out the window came another bright flash of orange flames as something exploded in mid-air. Graham ducked instinctively to avoid being hit, not realising the damage had been felt by the metal structure of the building only. The rest of them raised a weapon for a second, then lowered them again. Everyone was on edge and ready to react immediately. Graham, on the other hand, was ready to leap to the floor and cover his head.

As they slowly stepped through the bowels of the broken skyscraper they observed the ongoing fight through the window. Every now and again, when the sound of something hitting the building rang through the walls, the entire group would stop and crouch down. They would only move again once given the order by their commanding officer.

Once at the stairwell door they took a moment to assess their situation more closely. Captain Rigs sent one of his people ahead to the floor below while the rest stood by. It was only a short rest, but it was enough to give Graham a chance to take a proper peek outside.

"Keep away from the window, sir," the woman soldier said. He had missed seeing her follow him to the door of a burnt-out office.

Graham did as he was told, even though his curiosity desperately wanted the opposite. He remained a good few meters away from the glass and arched his head up to the sky.

High above the city he tried to pick out the Ring's outline. It was easy to find, seeing as it appeared the main source of the noise permeating the night. An entire swarm of drones still whizzed around, more than he could possibly count. Once every few seconds the Ring's defensive cannon would pick out one of its enemies and send it hurtling into

the outside edge of the shield. Occasionally the drones would try and avoid being hit only to be clipped in the side and left to spiral away.

But the hole in the shield was gone. And the enemy's drone force had been cut off from the inside.

"Gregson, what is the status of the Ring?" Captain Rigs called from the corridor.

Gregson was the name of the female soldier standing beside Graham. She stepped toward the glass and looked up, her weapon by her side. "It's still fighting the enemy drones off, sir. The laser device isn't firing anymore. Mr. Denehey must be right; it's got to be cooling down ready for the next firing."

"They won't try again until the sky around them is clear. Come on, we need to get moving," the Captain shouted back.

They disappeared into the unlit stairwell next. The man Captain Rigs had sent ahead reported back with the all clear. In the stairwell they stood in a single file line down the stairs as the plan was forced to adapt.

"Everyone, check your weapons. We may have to fight our way out of here."

"What? We can't fight them." Graham stepped down a few steps to say this.

"We can handle ourselves just fine, Mr. Denehey."

"Are you kidding me? What about this makes you think we stand a chance against them? The drones won't be able to find us if we can hide somewhere."

"Hide. We don't hide, we fight."

"With what, these peashooters?"

"Enough!" Captain Rigs barked. "The day I let a bloody civvy tell me what to do is the day I retire from the SAS. We came here to do a job and I'm damned well not going to abandon it." He turned to Watts, who stood in the corner of the stairwell. "I want comms, trooper."

"I'm trying, sir, but there's too much interference."

"You must have something. Team two must be nearby."

"Sir, they could be two floors down from us and I wouldn't hear them through all this shit."

"Fine, then we head down through the building. The lobby can be our temporary ops centre. If we have to search for Team Two by sight alone then that's what we're going to do."

"Sir," Gregson said with her arms resting on her weapon. "The Ring should be sending more teams down soon, shouldn't we wait for them to arrive?"

"We can't wait for them, trooper. We need to set up the ops centre before they head down."

Graham again felt compelled to speak up. "They wouldn't send more into that chaos, would they?"

"No-one else is coming, G," the voice inside told Graham, who did his best to ignore it.

"Once we restore communication with the Ring we'll know what the plan is," Captain Rigs said as he began to take two steps at a time down the dark stairwell. "Our priority is to set up a base of operations. When the others arrive they'll know where to go. If we're going to get a foothold in the city, then there has to be a starting point on the ground. Come on."

It was a slow journey down the stairs. An almost constant crashing and smashing from above suggested the top floors had become the territory of the enemy's flying fighters, more of which had now turned up. At each new floor they took a quick look through the door and checked the progress of the search lights. It would only be a short while before the enemy found something new to shoot at.

By the time they reached the bottom floor Graham was exhausted. His thin legs had struggled with the repetitive nature of taking each step, one after the other. They now ached and seemed to creak with every heavy footstep he took. The soldiers were much healthier than him and so appeared almost completely unaffected by the quick trek.

Even with their equipment hanging from their shoulders and from their bullet-proof vests, they were able to move freely.

The first floor of the building left behind the small rooms and cubicles of the upper floors and instead opened out into a large space. As they stepped out of the stairwell they were met with a long row of lifts, all dead through lack of power. They ran along the opposing sides of the floor.

In the middle there was a small coffee shop situated in a large circular area, which had been sectioned off with thin wooden walls no more than ten feet high. It had a casual feel to it - at least it would have done before then. As with most other parts of the building that they had seen already, the place had been wholly trashed and left with upturned chairs all over the place.

To reach the ground floor they only had to take the metal escalators to the lobby. Captain Rigs slowly edged his way around the coffee shop and toward them. He took sideways steps as he took his time and checked around himself. The others did the same. They scanned the place with their torches, waving them from side to side and up and down. All of this was organised with hand gestures alone, all coming from the Captain.

Each soldier returned a moment later and confirmed safety with a 'clear'.

"This will have to do," Captain Rigs said. "Watts, set yourself up in the coffee shop there. Keep trying to break through the interference. The rest of you barricade the escalators with whatever you can find and set up a safe perimeter. I want cameras facing each way with motion detectors and alarms. Gregson?"

"Yes, sir?" She returned from the other side of the coffee shop's wooden walls.

"Place charges around the front doors of the lobby. We'll keep the barricade open until you've done that. If any

enemies try to get inside the building I want them to know why they shouldn't try again."

Standing by and waiting for orders to come his way was Graham. He watched as everyone else went about their job and secured the area with the tech they had carried there from the PODs. His reason for being there was not quite needed yet, not until they realised that hiding would be their only chance of survival. Nothing came Graham's way at all. Captain Rigs hardly even acknowledged his presence before he went about his business. In the end Graham decided to find out for himself if he could help, so ventured around the corner and into the small coffee shop.

Sitting at a table near the metal and glass cabinets of the coffee shop – no doubt ones that once contained tasty treats for the staff who had worked there – was Watts. He had opened out his chunky wrist screen into a similarly cumbersome tablet and was twisting small dials protruding from the screen. The tablet had a sophisticated tactile system installed that allowed temporary buttons in the form of raised areas to come right out of the plastic.

By the strained look on his face it was obvious he had still not found anyone else.

"Erm, Captain?" Graham said.

"What is it, Mr. Denehey?"

"What should I do?"

Long lines of sweat traced down Captain Rigs' angled head as he faced Graham sidelong. "Find somewhere comfortable and wait until I need you," he said, before wiping his big eyebrows.

Fuck you too! Graham thought. With that, he was free to do as he pleased. He decided to take a seat in the coffee shop, near enough to Watts to hear for any change, but far enough away still to have a little chat with himself again. "Hey, you here?" he asked the seat beside him, his hand covering his mouth from view. "Come on, you need to help me keep these guys alive."

His imaginary friend blinked into existence with the question only having just left Graham's lips. "I'm not quite sure you understand the arrangement here, G." The other, still much tidier looking Graham sat in the chair opposite. "Helping these people is not part of our mission."

"Well, it is now, since everything that could go wrong *is* going wrong."

"We don't have the time or the resources to help them. Besides, they're on their own in here now. So, either you convince them to leave here and find a Conduit or we'll have to ditch them."

A quick look of confusion from Watts, sitting only two tables away, made Graham turn further. Even with the light levels low he could not afford to bring attention to himself. The conversation shifted to the table behind Graham now, where the other him had suddenly appeared.

"We're going to a Conduit? I didn't see one while inside the Sentient world. But didn't Luke find one?"

"Yes, he did. Phoenix used one in the real world too. That's how she communicated with you, G. We'll need to use one to reach Luke and the others in their world."

"OK, so how do we find one? They could be anywhere in the city."

A sharp, but short, sensation of heat came from beneath the bandage on Graham's hand unexpectedly. He slapped his other hand over it and felt it building in intensity. His first instinct was to rip the wrapping away and rub the glassy object sticking out of his skin. Yet it passed a moment later without any residual feelings left behind.

"Feel that?"

Graham nodded nervously. "What was it?"

"For now you can consider it your guide. The diamond will lead us to the nearest Conduit. Keep it to yourself, though. Revealing it to these people will only cause us more trouble."

"So, what now?"

"Now, you have your work cut out for you, buddy boy. If they stay here, they will die."

As the second him quickly vanished into the darkness, Graham finished with one last request. "I could really use some help convincing them."

A moment later he heard a reply, but the other him did not reappear to say it. "I'll see what I can do. Stay close to Watts. He'll be busy soon."

Gregson marched into the coffee shop. The bag she had been carrying around her back now hung loose and open, its contents having been placed strategically around the area. "Sir, charges are all set. The front doors have infrared Laser trip wires across them; anyone tries to get in, they'll get a face full of C4."

Captain Rigs went to reply at the same time that Watts suddenly became rather excited about something. It seemed that the other Graham had seen it coming a few minutes earlier.

"Sir, I've got them," he said with a slap of the table in front of him. "The Ring is forming another hole in the shield. I can hear them again."

"About time," Captain Rigs responded. "Update them on our current situation."

Watts wasted no time in telling those aboard the Ring just how bad things had gotten. "Team One is on the ground, one missing and minor injuries reported. The Captain and our civilian made it through. But we've lost contact with Team Two, suspect casualties. We're setting up temporary base in lobby of building, over."

"Up ... date ... received..." The response came with a strong and angry hiss as the interference played havoc with the equipment again.

Captain Rigs then leant over Watts and began to talk into the radio. "Immediate vicinity is hot, I repeat, immediate vicinity is hot, advise the Ring uses all countermeasures and

offensive capabilities to clear the sky during next launch of PODs."

Nothing returned to them through the speakers this time, not even a broken message to interpret. What came in the place of a reply from the Ring was another floor shaking rattle and deep booming noise from above. This time the explosion was more forceful than the others they had heard and felt. The walls and glass windows of the lobby wobbled and creaked as the vibrations passed through them like ripples in a puddle. It was obvious to them all that this had not been another enemy drone crashing into the side of their building, but something else entirely.

"What the hell is going on?" Graham said quietly and only for himself and his internal clone to hear. There was no reply.

Captain Rigs sent Gregson to the window with a flick of his fingers. When she reached the point where she could see high enough into the sky to see the Ring, she froze. While staring through a small pair of binoculars she let her shoulders droop the moment she saw it.

"What do you see?" Captain Rigs said with a clear urgency to his voice.

"Jesus Christ, it's on fire," Gregson replied.

"What?"

"Sir, there must have been an explosion in one of the carriages, because all I'm seeing is... Wait, the Laser rig, sir, it's gone."

"What do you mean *gone*?"

"The drones... they must have destroyed it."

"What about the hole in the shield?"

"It's gone too."

Captain Rigs sat heavily in a nearby chair. His face looked as though it was feeling a strong pull downwards, where it began to bunch up around his jaw. Not appearing to be one for sharing his real feelings to others, he soon snapped back into his role as leader. He did not seem happy

unless he was ordering people about. “OK, everyone, listen up. We’re on our own, it seems. This is no longer about hurting the enemy, and it’s certainly not a stealth mission anymore, but one of survival. We’re here for the long haul. So find somewhere to set up and get comfortable. The minute the enemy finds us, we’ll have to be ready.”

“With the Laser device gone, we’re trapped.” Graham felt his breathing speed up in response to yet another setback.

“That’s not helping anyone, Mr. Denehey. Suck it up and get to work building that barricade with the others.”

“Hold up, Captain ... What the...” Watts said, his finger pushed deep into his earpiece.

The interruption held back Graham’s coming verbal attack on his imaginary companion. He was angry for having been ignored. If not for Watts, he would have let rip and not stopped until he had run out of words to use.

“What is it, Watts?” the Captain said.

“I’m getting something.”

“From the Ring?”

“No sir.”

“Who is it then, and how are they getting through the shield’s interference?”

Watts slowly turned to face them all, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open. “It’s not from outside the shield, sir. It’s coming from someone *inside*.”

“What! Well, let’s hear them then.”

With a short round of button pushes and dial twists, Watts made the voices loud enough for them all to hear.

“Who is this?” someone said through the speaker system. “How are you contacting us on this frequency? It’s supposed to be encrypted.”

“Say hello to the resistance, G,” the internal voice unexpectedly reappeared to tell Graham.

Chapter 13

First impressions

Captain Rigs stood behind Watts and spoke into the screen sat on the table. He had taken his time to reply to those on the other end, and only agreed to do so with caution. He clearly did not trust them. "Identify yourself, immediately," he said.

The only one there who really understood what was going on was Graham. His imaginary friend had gone beyond his role of guide once more and stepped in. Using the diamond device's wireless capabilities, he had hacked Watt's tablet. They were now speaking to the remaining human faction hiding somewhere within the city. The two groups had been put in contact by the ever present clone inside Graham's head. This time the assistance was to benefit them all, and not just to further its own agenda.

"You contacted us, so you first, mister." It was a young woman speaking. "Wait. Are you the idiots that just lit up the sky like fireworks night?"

"The idiots you're talking about are SAS soldiers, so watch your words. We were sent here to help you," Captain Rigs said.

"Well done then, you're here. Now shut the hell up."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're all making too much noise. This frequency is for emergencies only. By talking to you we're making it easier for them to find us. Just tell us where you are."

Captain Rigs had a sudden hesitance to his actions; his mistrust was getting in the way of progress. He stood straight for a few moments, which he took to think deeply, before again leaning on the back of the chair in front of him. In the end he appeared to have weighed up the risk and deemed it worth a try. "We landed in the financial district, in one of the office buildings. We're holding a position in the lobby."

The woman on the other end gave a *pfft* sound in response. "You guys have no idea, do you? You're not 'holding' that position, you're trapped there. We saw your light show from here, which means they will have too."

"We're prepared to face the enemy when the time comes." Captain Rigs lowered his mouth to speak to Watts in a hushed tone. "Can you locate them?"

Watts shook his head. "I'm not even sure how we're talking to them. It's like the tablet found them by itself."

"You should come to us," Captain Rigs continued to say through the radio. "We can protect you all here. We're heavily armed and well stocked with ammo."

A dismissive snort returned through the speakers. The person on the other end was finding the Captain's confidence quite humorous. "We're safer here thanks. We've been in hiding since this all started, so I think we know best." She was drawn away from the mic for a short while after her last comment.

Another with her had other ideas.

"They can't stay there, they'll be massacred," a raspy sounding man said in the background. "We should help them get to safety. If the others were here they'd agree with me."

"But they aren't here, are they? They're off on another suicide run to disable the next relay? They left us in charge while they were gone, so we decide." The woman became louder as she spoke directly into the mic. "Look, if you've

got any sense at all, then you'll get the heck out of that building right now. It's not safe."

Captain Rigs answered straight away. "We're holding this position."

"Fine, well if you won't listen to reason then at least listen to this. When you realise your mistake come find us, if you can. Do you have a map on you?"

Watts brought up a floating holographic map from his tablet computer as they went ahead and gave their coordinates. Graham could see the location from his position nearby. It appeared to be at one of the few places he could see someone surviving through the worst of the fighting; it was a processing warehouse where the farming towers' produce would be delivered by the underground tunnel network. That made them right in his eyes. They were indeed much safer.

"We have the location now, thank you. We'll get to you as soon as we can."

"Unbelievable," the woman said, again with her face turned away from the mic. She returned to say one last thing. "Stay off the radio from now on."

* * *

An hour passed by without much of a change to their situation. Graham could still hear the crashing about in the upper floors as the aerial drones continued their search. He had wondered why they had not simply followed them straight to the bottom floors. It seemed to him the most obvious thing to do.

That they had chosen not to do that made him nervous.

His companions were now fairly settled in their barricaded area. They thought at least, that they had the place locked down. Of course nothing had arrived to prove them wrong just yet. That test was to come at some point.

Unfortunately for Graham, he could see no way of getting them to leave this place. He also saw no achievable way of getting to a Conduit. Until something changed, he would be stuck there and with no hopes of starting his own mission.

Gregson returned from yet another short patrol of the outside of the coffee shop. There was barely the room to run in there, so each patrol only lasted a few minutes before starting again. Graham had watched her wander around the lifts a couple of times and then swing by the blocked escalators to finish up. So far the night had not turned against them.

"Gregson, report," Captain Rigs called to her from his table. After the short chat they had shared with the strangers within the city, he had become preoccupied with the radio system. Watts could still not break through the interference to find the second team, which irked him greatly. Again, Graham knew why; his double was the only one with the way to do it.

That reminded Graham, he needed to ask his friend exactly how he was able to do that.

"All clear, sir," Gregson responded. She followed with a stutter as a question she wanted to ask bubbled up. At the last moment she held it back.

"Spit it out, Gregson."

"It's just that...well, sir. What exactly are we doing here? If we can't find Team Two and can't communicate with the Ring, then what's left? I was just thinking about our mission."

"Go on."

"Well, after setting up base we were to go ahead with finding and destroying the nearest relay. We could still do that, sir. I mean, we have the explosives and Mr. Denehey too."

"We do indeed, soldier. But we have less than half of the number of feet on the ground that we intended too. There's only six of us, out of the ten that left the Ring. And that's not

even including teams Three and Four, who are still up there, along with the rest of the soldiers that were to follow." Captain Rigs sent an expectant look to Graham, who slid down in his seat a little in reply. "Mr. Denehey, perhaps you could tell us how you plan to help, seeing as you are now our back-up plan?"

"Erm, do what?" Graham said, his eyes burying themselves into the wood of the table before him.

"The only reason you're here is because the Brigadier was under the impression you could hack the network. If we could bring some of the relays down, we could still make a difference here."

"Oh, that. Right, well. The only problem is we need to be at one of them, and I don't think that's a very clever thing to do right now."

"But if we got you to one, you'd be able to do something? You said you used to be a Simova technician."

Graham wriggled on the spot as he begged the voice in his head to return again. All along he had lied to keep himself in the right place, at the right time. Luckily he only needed to do this until his doppelgänger spoke up, something he was hoping would happen once more.

"Mr. Denehey?" Captain Rigs stood and approached.

"It's a little complicated to explain. But yes, I should be able to do something."

"Should? That's not quite as certain as we were led to believe. I'm starting to wonder whether you really need to be here or not. Or is there something else going on?"

No answer lay within Graham's reach, leaving him staring back instead. He could see something building behind Captain Riggs' eyes, what he assumed to be a growing anger toward him. He was now stepping further into the corner he had already been backed, and his only way out looked about ready to snap shut.

"You tell them the truth and they'll probably string you up, G."

Graham was relieved to hear his clone speaking to him again. For a short while he worried it had left him behind, after having made its impatience known on a few occasions already. *I have to tell them, it's the only way to make them leave here and find somewhere safer*, he thought.

"If you have to then wait until the time is right. They'll learn the truth of their situation soon enough. In fact, I think it's about to happen."

Captain Rigs appeared to have given up on getting an answer from Graham and slowly went back to his own thoughts. Their exchange had left a sourness to the air between them though, one Graham knew would remain until he came clean about his true purpose for being there.

A sudden cease to the noises from the upper floors of the building soon stole their attention away from the question of Graham's intentions. The drones could soon be seen swooping down over the nearby rooftops and away into the distance. Had they given up trying to locate the intruders?

"Davis, what's going on out there?" Captain Rigs asked.

The other soldier had remained near to the window while the rest stayed close to the centre. His watchful eyes kept close attention to what went on outside the building.
"The drones are leaving, sir," he replied.

"Finally. Right, I need you to head up to the roof of the building and look for Team Two in the area. From up there you should have a clear enough view to find them nearby with your binoculars. The rest of you will hold this position, while myself and Mr. Denehey here have a little chat in private."

The idea of going anywhere with the Captain made Graham instantly grip the bottom of his seat. He knew exactly what their 'chat' would involve; after a few heated words it would turn to threats, even violence, to get the truth. He remained in his seat as the table was pulled away. Suddenly feeling exposed and on show for all of the

suspicious eyes to study, he had little choice but to join Captain Rigs as he led the way to a dark corner of the lobby.

Feel free to step in whenever you want, Graham told his other self.

They were both stopped in their tracks when a barely audible alarm started to call out from Watts' tablet. Graham was relieved at first. Then he remembered what the alarm was for; something had been spotted by the cameras.

"Talk to me?" Captain Rigs said, his head raised to see over Graham's shoulder - who had not thought to step aside.

"There's movement outside the building, sir." Watts held his tablet in his hands and swung it around himself. With the position of the cameras covering roughly the whole 360 degrees surrounding them, he could aim his tablet in any direction and see the camera feeds as a virtual overlay. For a short while he appeared unable to decipher the alarms exact message. After a few more frantic searches he eventually spotted the direction the movement had come from.

"How many?"

"I can't tell, sir. I'm not seeing much in the darkness. Let me switch to infra-red."

Still following like a loyal pet, Graham took a position beside Captain Rigs and watched Watts' tablet screen turn to one of predominantly purple shades of colour. But where before it had been just a bare view of the small seated area and street outside, it now contained many details of interest. Most immediate of which was a line of red and orange that was heading toward them from the opposite building.

"Is that?" was all Graham could say as he watched the line draw slowly closer.

Captain Rigs ignored the question completely. "Dammit. Everyone get ready. We have possible targets incoming. Choose a position and stick to it, no changing your mind at

the last minute. Remember, we've set charges on the front doors so keep your heads down."

As if kicked up a gear, each soldier leapt into action and ran for the front barricade. They carried their equipment to a place of their choosing and threw it down to the floor, as though claiming the spot for themselves.

The barricade, though only made up of chairs and tables from the coffee shop, appeared almost unbreakable. Beside the escalators ran a solid concrete wall at roughly waist height, which provided the perfect shield for those now peeking over the top of it. From there Graham's small group had the advantage over anyone below.

"They're getting close, sir," Watts said with his tablet still raised and pointing toward the front entrance of the building. He had now left his table and was standing a few feet away from the other soldiers, all readying their weapons to fire when needed. The barricade had been joined by a line of weaponry, the likes of which were sure to rip apart anyone caught in their sights.

"Everyone hold your fire unless they're inside. The charges should scare them off." Captain Rigs knelt down behind the concrete wall. He cocked his weapon with a short and sharp yank, then checked down the sight. The glass entrances at the bottom of the escalators soon became his only concern.

Watts spun his tablet around to see the full extent of the enemy's forces. His reaction told them all it was bigger than they were hoping for. "Sir, they're surrounding the entire front of the building. Facial recognition counts more than a hundred people, all armed...Wait a minute. They've stopped."

"What are they doing?" Gregson asked, her eyes glaring down the sight of her weapon.

Captain Rigs quickly interrupted. "Just be ready. They know we're in here, they won't risk storming us."

Graham knew the opposite was really the truth, that these people were hardly concerned with losing soldiers. He could see the only outcome would be the very selfless sacrifice of possibly all of those outside. If it was Isaac's desire to have them all rush the building and die in order to kill Graham's small group, then that would be what they did. "Captain Rigs?" he said, before patting the Captain on the shoulder when he did not answer.

"Not now."

"You have to listen to me. They don't care how many they might lose here. They've got many more where they came from. This is a pointless fight."

Dropping his rifle to his side and turning to face Graham, Captain Rigs finally decided to engage in the conversation. "What are you saying?"

"We should find a way to escape and meet up with the resistance. All we'll achieve here is to fail before we've had a chance to help."

"Brigadier Harrington told me about your crazy thoughts on the enemy."

"They're not crazy thoughts, Captain, they're the truth. I've seen it with my own eyes. You have no idea what you're really dealing with here, no-one on the Ring does either. These aren't normal people anymore."

"Just stay quiet while we deal with this."

Graham raised his voice in return. "Listen to me."

The reply came with an equal amount of surprise to those listening in nearby. "Shut your fucking mouth, right now. Do you know how nuts you sound? I should never have agreed to bring you here."

A voice spoke through Watts' tablet computer as an uncomfortable silence fell upon the group. Each soldier stared at Graham with a deep and obvious sense of paranoia over his insistence to tell them his tale. They now saw him as nothing more than a crazy person, with a story

straight out of his own imagination. Because of this, only Graham could see what was really going to happen next.

"Captain Rigs, come in, this is Team Two, over." The man on the other end of the line spoke slowly and without inflection.

"Thank Christ, they made it after all. Watts," Captain Rigs said, "get their location. Tell them we'll need them to help pick off these pricks surrounding us."

Watts began to repeat the message but was cut off shortly afterwards. The person at the other end appeared uninterested in listening.

"You will not win this fight, Captain," the man said.

"What the hell is he talking about?" Captain Rigs ushered Watts over to join him and immediately snatched the tablet out of his hands. "Ellis, is that you?"

"Yes, sir."

Again Graham noted how lacking in any emotion Ellis' voice was. It contained nothing he expected a person trapped behind enemy lines would have. There was no lowering of his voice to avoid detection, no spikes in pitch as the adrenaline peaked, not even any degree of wavering.

"How many of you made it to the ground safely?"

"I am the only one, sir."

Captain Rigs rested his elbow on his knee and his head against his fist. The anger at how badly they had been hit made a clear impression on his body, which tensed and flexed at the same time. "Can you see the crowd around our building?"

"Sir," Watts reached for the tablet and turned it to aim directly at the front entrance of the building. It showed something none of them were ready for; Ellis was at the front door.

"He's not himself anymore, Captain," Graham managed to say.

Ellis continued, "You must all exit the building. You cannot hope to defeat us."

"Why is he talking like that?" Gregson ducked down below the concrete wall to say. "Have they done something to him?"

Graham answered. "I've been trying to tell you. What you see out there is not Ellis, it's one of them."

When Ellis spoke again his words shook the soldiers into immediate action. "I am entering the building," he said.

"No, Ellis, stay outside," Captain Rigs replied.

"He's not listening, sir." Gregson went to stand and shout through the lobby just as the door opened. "The charges. God dammit, Ellis, stop!"

"I must enter the building—"

Everyone leapt to the ground as the door clicked open and pushed through the tripwire strewn across it. Although only a few bricks of C4, the explosion still contained enough force to engulf the whole front face of the lobby in flames and rattle the foundations of the building. The windows shattered throughout the ground floor, sending sharp pieces of debris shooting at their small group and sticking into the concrete wall protecting them.

Graham slapped his head to the cold ground and covered his ears as the sound of Ellis' body flying apart and hitting each wall of the lobby burst past. The heat of the blast rushed by too, which ruffled his jumpsuit and left a disturbing warmth to it. What followed next was the noise of tiny pieces of debris landing on the floor like that of rain upon a metal roof. It continued for a while after the explosion had faded and the ball of flames had gone out.

"Fuck!" Captain Rigs called out before raising himself up to see over the wall. "Son-of-a-bitch, just walked straight through it. He didn't even care."

By the time Graham had found his balance enough to join Captain Rigs by the wall the scene had again changed beyond recognition. The first thing he saw was the gaping hole in the front section of the lobby and then the missing glass of the large windows, which now covered the ground

like a layer of glitter in the moonlight. Ellis' body had been almost entirely destroyed and was nothing more than broken pieces about the place. But there was no blood, all of it had been vaporised in the explosion.

With the separation of inside and outside having been permanently removed, their hiding place was now open to the elements. The night had turned wet with a light sheet of rain descending upon the line of suddenly very visible people standing there. Seeing them all staring blindly ahead brought Graham to an immediate halt. He dare not move from the spot in case one of them saw him.

"Bastards..." Gregson yelled as she took aim. "Give us the order, sir."

Once again the quietness of the evening was shattered, this time in the form of an angry volley of bullets from the front line of enemies. Their weapons growled as they let loose their metal spittle, the sudden release lighting up the dim room. It pushed each soldier into a defensive posture, hiding behind the concrete wall. Captain Rigs had no chance to give his own order to fire before the carnage began.

A wall of bullets began ricocheting off of the front side of the wall, chipping the barricade away one sharp piece of concrete at a time. It showed no sign of stopping either, with the entire front row of Sentients appearing hell-bent on emptying their armoury into the building. It gave those covering themselves from the attack barely a single opportunity to return fire. Only when a few of the enemies were forced to reload did the moment finally arrive.

"Fire," Captain Rigs roared, before unloading an entire clip into the enemy. Everyone else followed his lead after that.

Graham was horrified to see almost all of the front row of Sentients fall away and land in a neat pile a second later. They made no attempt to avoid being hit, they just took the attack as it came. He knew the death-toll would continue

until every single Sentient had been claimed. But still, and despite his conflicting feelings, he tried his best to educate the angry soldiers around him. A decision he knew would set him once again against Captain Rigs. "Stop, please, you can't kill them, they're still human inside," he screamed at the top of his voice.

No-one listened to his plea. They continued to fire and showed no sign of stopping, not even when the next row of bodies stepped forward to fill the gap.

"Graham, make them stop, you have to make them stop." The other him appeared by his side and begged of him.

"I said stop!" Graham reached for the Captain and took a hold of his arm to pull him back from the mindless attack.

"Get the fuck off me," Captain Rigs replied, shoving Graham back to the floor. He then continued to reload and begin firing again. They were sure they were making progress.

But progress was not to be determined by body count, but by their escape from the fight. For that to happen something would have to give, and it was set to be Graham's group that eventually would. He had already seen his companions go through a couple of magazines; they were surely running out of bullets by now.

The instant they did the enemy would surely overwhelm them.

"You're killing innocent people," Graham said quietly. He cowered down behind the concrete wall and tried his best to ignore the horrific scene of tangled limbs and bloodied faces playing out just beyond the building's entrance.

"This is why we have to keep the military out of here, Graham." His second self had a noticeable stutter to his voice.

The military would kill every last one of them, regardless of the human and Sentient lives lost in the process. Graham quickly realised his unseen friend had been right all along. He finally understood the terrible cost of Isaac's war, and

could now see the real fight for the first time. His lesson had been a tough one to learn, but he had learnt it now. If he could not convince these soldiers with words, then he would have to find another way.

To do that he would find a Conduit and show them instead.

Chapter 14

From darkness

The fighting lasted another half-an-hour, on and off. It slowed as each side saw the futility of their actions. Neither would win outright like this; one side needed to take the initiative and crush the opposition once and for all. Understandably, Captain Rigs was determined to make sure that was his side. So after using up most of his ammo he turned to throwing grenades into the crowd instead.

Each explosion only spurred him on more, to the point where his companions had to restrain him from leaping over the wall all by himself and charging the few Sentients who had made it into the building.

For Graham it had become a heart breaking scene of chaos and devastation. He did his best to keep his mind focused on what he now saw as his one last mission in life; to see the end of such fighting. The thought of what was going on just beyond his field of vision threatened his concentration more than he cared to admit, yet he had little choice but to try and ignore it. There was nothing he could do to stop it now.

The only way he had of blocking it out was to close his ears and eyes off to the world and shrink back into himself. While the fighting continued he could do nothing in terms of figuring out a plan of escape from there. He was trapped until something changed.

With his mind slowly having disappeared into his own head, Graham had missed the progress of the enemy. His last peek over the wall had revealed a small group huddled behind the potted plants at the bottom of the escalators. They had not lasted long and were dealt with swiftly by a grenade that landed at their feet. Seeing them all bursting in a red puff of blood and guts was the last straw for him.

After that he lost his appetite for the battle.

When the need arrived to bring him out of his imaginary safe zone he initially resisted with a rigorous shake of his head. It was only when the person attempting to get his attention forcibly removed his hands from his ears that he finally came back to reality.

It was Gregson.

"Graham, listen to me, they're stopping," she shouted.

He soon understood the urgency as he found the night almost peaceful all of a sudden. The popping sounds from the weapons fire had ceased and only the creaking and cracking of the hot slugs embedded in the front of the wall remained. "Is it over?" he asked.

"For the moment, yes. They began to back off a few minutes ago. We think they're regrouping for another attack."

This was not quite the news Graham had wanted to hear. Silence was only set to last a short while, then it was due to become bleaker still.

"Can you slow them down somehow?" Gregson posed the question to him with Watts' tablet in her hands. She barely waited for longer than a blink before shoving it into his stomach.

"I can't do anything with this."

"But the Captain said you were sent here to hack the enemy, so bloody do it already."

Graham quickly came to realise something; the Captain was missing. He would normally have been the one ordering everyone about and looking for their next move,

but he had left Graham's side. "Where's the—" He stopped shortly after spotting the man he sought a few metres away.

He then noticed the spattered blood all over the tablet in his hands.

"Davis was hit in the throat," Gregson said.

As well as Captain Rigs, Watts was there too, bent over the body and rapidly tending to the wound. It looked beyond their help, from what Graham could see. The growing pool of blood, as black as the night, stretched at least a metre away from the top of the dying man's head. Death was surely only moments away from taking him finally, yet those around worked as fast as they could to slow it down.

"This is so messed up," Gregson began again. "I've never seen an enemy like this before. It's like they don't understand what's going on. Not one of them reacted when hit by a bullet."

"We're all dead if we don't find a way out of here," Graham replied. He was unable to take his eyes off of the frantic attempt to keep Davis from bleeding out all over the floor. It was a fate he saw each of them suffering soon enough too.

With one last compression of the injured soldier's chest it appeared it was no good. He had been too far gone to survive the ordeal. Captain Rigs slumped down beside the body as it breathed its last, blood-filled breath. For Watts it was still not over. He held his hands tightly around the dead man's neck and ignored the obvious signs of having lost him already. The wound had stopped seeping now, but his arms were covered in blood.

No-one spoke while the loss sunk in, undoubtedly the first of many if they chose to stay put. Even the noises from outside could not break the solemn mood now spreading throughout the group. It took a sound much louder and familiar to them to draw them out of the circle of blood upon the floor.

Graham heard it too; it was the flutter of rotors, lots of them.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me. The drones are back," Captain Rigs shouted out. "Everyone, back into cover."

Gregson turned back to Graham and lifted the tablet up. "Do something. They'll pick us off in minutes if you don't"

"I'm sorry, I can't."

A deep thumping of the drones' rotors soon overwhelmed all other sounds, making the area almost unbearable. They hovered a few feet above the ground, the line made up of five of them. Using the lights on their noses, the drones highlighted the exact position Graham's group was hiding. Next came a collection of red targeting lasers that swooped about the inside of the lobby, shining just above Graham's head. Once they found where they were planning on firing they each beeped and clicked in readiness.

The end was now only seconds away.

If you've got anything, now's the time to try it, Graham said internally to his other self.

The reply was simple; "I'm sorry, G."

By now each of the remaining soldiers there were cowering behind the protective wall, using what remained of its crumbling structure to take as much of the coming attack for them as possible. So when the first blast from the drones was released they all dropped as low as possible.

But the shot never hit the wall. Instead a bright white flash of light and an electrical fizz blew past them like a hurricane wind. Every piece of electrical equipment in the soldiers' possession popped and crackled, leaving some of it burning. Watts' tablet had not survived the influx of energy either. Graham threw it to the floor and watched as its insides continued to disintegrate while it slid away

"What ... the fuck ... was that?" Gregson said. She was first to her feet to see the status of the enemy.

"Someone let off a damn EMP" Captain Rigs called out. "Everyone check your equipment. Leave anything that doesn't work behind."

Graham followed quickly after her and bobbed his head above the wall. What he saw brought a skip to his heart. Had his other self finally managed to do something? He peeled back the bandage on his hand to see if it too had been effected and found it blinking in a seemingly random pattern. He considered this for a second before turning his attention to the enemy. The diamond embedded in his skin was not unlike the human made tech after all; they were both easy to damage with an EMP blast.

The five drones had weathered the short storm even worse than the tech Graham's group were now without. Their Laser targets no longer shone, nor did the bright lights that had forced the soldiers out of the darkness. Graham could see the lifeless carcasses of the drones all lying on the ground in varying states of disrepair. Beyond that he saw another, equally promising, sight in the form of a stationary crowd of Sentients. The ones lucky enough to have avoided being hit by a stray bullet were now an unmoving mass of people just past the piles of bodies.

The blast had stunned them all.

Movement outside the building caused an outbreak of shouts for whoever was there to stop where they were. Someone was hiding behind the veil of the night-time rain, and approaching with a slow step-by-step motion. When the person reached the open face of the lobby it was their feet crunching glass that first gave them away.

"Stop right there!" Captain Rigs ordered of them again.

The person who stepped forward at the bottom of the escalators was clearly not one of the enemy, as demonstrated by their choice of clothing. They were not wearing the same black fatigues of the Sentient soldiers, but ordinary clothes, dirtied with long smears of muck and grease.

Yet that was not the important thing about this person. That Graham recognised them was, however. "I don't believe it," he said as he took a step toward the half-destroyed barricade at the top of the escalator.

"Stay back, Graham, that's an order." Captain Rigs grabbed him by the arm to hold him in place.

By now the person below had seen him too and was trying their best to reach him, with an urgency Graham completely understood. He felt the same himself. More soon came out from behind the veil of rain to join the other. Four were there in total, and each carried a hefty looking black weapon in their hands, with strange Orbs on the end.

"Phoenix!" Graham shouted to the woman, wearing a thick black cotton hat over most of her head.

"You know her?" Gregson asked, her eyes popping with delight and obvious relief.

But Graham could not answer the question; he was in shock.

The surprise at finding a familiar face had caused Phoenix to hesitate too. She dropped her weapon to her side and took a step back down the metal steps. "Holy shit!" she said.

One of her friends at the bottom of the steps, with the slight look of a heavy metal fan, quickly broke up the reunion with a sharp warning to them all. "Hey, Phoenix, we need to leave. Now!"

"Just give me a minute, Rhys," she angled her head to the side to say, before returning to Graham a moment later. "How are you here? Last time I saw you, you were..."

"Dammit, we don't have time to chat," Rhys protested with a quick scan of the area behind him. He was noticeably jumpy, more so than the others. "They won't stay like this for long, so we gotta go now."

"Who are you people?" Captain Rigs said.

Phoenix smiled to Graham and then replaced it almost immediately with a stern look to Captain Rigs. "There's no

time to explain. If you give a shit about surviving this, then you'll follow us. If you don't agree then you can piss off, OK?"

"Yeah, it's not like we risked our lives to help or anything."

"Shut it, Jack," Phoenix fired back to another member of their team. "So, who's coming then?"

"We all are," Graham said, pulling a piece of the barricade away, and his arm from the Captain's tight grip.

Captain Rigs responded with a sweeping look about the faces of his soldiers, all with signs of the battle they had endured. It was clear for all to see that there was only one choice. He confirmed it by taking the other end of the table Graham tried to move and pulling it free from the pile.

Soon after the rest of them joined in, until the escalator was clear of debris.

"Hey, come on, we need to hurry." Phoenix had spotted Watts in the background kneeling over Davis' body and yanking the tags from around the dead man's neck.

They were then finally ready to get out of there and away to freedom. After having been trapped in one place during such a hopeless fight, it was with a swiftness that they left it all behind. Most were carrying much less than before too, as the EMP had rendered it all useless. Not even the torches attached to the soldiers' weapons worked anymore.

"This way," Phoenix called over her shoulder as she led the way out of the building.

The rain fell harder now and had begun to wash away the blood that threatened to stain the paved ground. It quickly soaked through the clothing of the bodies lying about the place and partially blocking the way.

"You guys really did a number on this lot," Rhys said this as he sidestepped a loose hand sticking out from beneath a body.

It was a disturbing scene to walk through and one that contained too many blank faces for Graham to stand. In

almost every place he looked he saw yet another innocent person staring back at him. For the others who had faced the enemies now lying on the floor, it was only a reminder of how close to joining the dead they had been.

Behind the many bodies lay another obstacle. This time the faces were stuck in place, but far from dead. Each Sentient stood with their chin resting against their chests and their eyes aimed to the ground. There had to be dozens of them all waiting as though in some form of standby mode. A shower of rain drops fell from their bodies as they remained still, like fountain sculptures. Graham remained vigilant as he followed the others weaving a route between the frozen enemy soldiers.

"We should kill them all, before they wake up," Gregson said while aiming her rifle at the centre of a nearby enemy's chest.

A slap on the barrel of her rifle soon put an end to her thoughts on that subject.

"Save your ammo," Jack said, tucking a loose strand of his bright blonde hair back under his cotton hat. He only let go of the rifle when he was satisfied no harm was to follow.

Finally past the crowd, Phoenix then stopped to allow the rest to catch up. She waved them each ahead after relinquishing the front to Rhys and Jack. The pace sped up drastically shortly after, with everyone adopting a jogging speed. She then waited for Graham to catch up with her. "Graham," she said, with a nervously quick look to him. "Where's my brother?"

While they left the enemy behind and headed through the nearby streets in almost pitch black darkness it gave the two of them the chance to catch up. There was so much he had to tell her, but for the moment he focused only on what she wanted to know. The rest of it required much more time for him to explain without causing more confusion.

"Sean is fine; you don't have to worry about him. He and the military are outside the shield, they have been since the beginning," he replied as his breathlessness caught him suddenly by surprise.

"Is this all they sent?"

"No, there were more. We were ambushed the second we entered through the shield."

"So more are coming?"

"I'm afraid not. This is it." Graham hated giving her the hint of good news only to pull it away from her again. The truth was he had nothing good to tell her at all. In fact, he looked to her for the very same thing. They were trapped together now.

Rhys brought the group to a sudden stop at the end of a street corner. By holding out his arm and sweeping it back beside him, he told everyone to stick to the wall. He shot a quick look around the corner, which he ended with a rapid snap of his head back into cover. A finger to his lips spelled out the danger that resided just beyond. "Nobody move," he whispered back along the line. "They know something is up."

"What are they doing?" Phoenix asked from the rear, beside Graham.

"They're heading back where we came from. The others will be resetting soon."

"We don't want to be outside when that happens."

Captain Rigs interrupted before Phoenix or Rhys could go on. "Hey, can you cause another EMP blast?"

"No we can't, buddy." Jack spoke with a refreshing bluntness. "We used what we had to save your sorry ass. That EMP was supposed to bring down another relay."

"That was you?" the Captain replied. The surprise in his voice only seemed to annoy Jack even further.

"What, you don't think we're capable of fighting back? Let me tell you, *Rambo*, we've been doing just fine without your help."

"Jack, will you chill the fuck out," Phoenix said. "Can we move yet?"

"It's safe, let's go." Rhys raised his weapon to chest height as he stepped out from cover. In the moonlight they were too difficult to spot from a distance. But the safety of the night would do nothing against the drones, should they reset while the small group remained in the vicinity.

Graham was thankful to see that their route was not to be outside all the way; that seemed like suicide to him. Not only were the resistance utilising the farming towers' processing buildings, they were also using the tunnels as well. Access was ordinarily limited to only certain parts of the city, with small tunnel entrances situated around for maintenance crews. What he saw ahead of them was not one of these. Instead access came from a large hole in the pavement.

Surrounding the broken ground sat the remains of a twelve storey building, one once used as apartments for those lucky enough, at the time, to have afforded to live this close to the city centre. The entire front of the building had been stripped away and lay scattered about. Whatever had devastated the structure appeared to have been powerful enough to break through the earth beneath it too.

Rhys stopped at the edge of the crater and pointed down to the water-logged and muddy floor a few metres below. A creak above him halted his imminent explanation. He shot a look up to the shell of the building near to them as a piece of the flooring high above fell to the street. The noise made him cringe in response. He knew it would attract attention that they could not afford. "The tunnel access is just down there," he finally said to the group. "It's another ten, fifteen minutes to the end."

As the first few of them followed Rhys into the hole an explosion in the distance rang out. Graham turned back the way they came and saw the building he and the others had been pinned down in start to lurch to the side a little.

No doubt in reaction to their enemy disappearing before their eyes, the Sentients had taken to blasting the building apart. He saw the drones that had been only moments from ending his existence sending beam after beam of angry energy into the empty floors of the skyscraper. They wanted every hint of Graham's group wiped clean, it appeared. As if their failure was too much to bear.

One by one, Graham and the others leapt into the knee high puddle at the bottom of the crater and climbed into the city's bloodless veins. None of them cared to hang around and see the result of the enemy's barrage.

Chapter 15

The forgotten

After only a short while the violent shaking from the attacks on the surface settled down. The enemy Sentients were obviously furious to have been evaded so suddenly, and were taking out their frustrations on the city instead. Each boom and rattle of the earth above Graham's head had been the destruction of yet another part of his beloved city. The enemy were ruining it all at the slightest hint of the resistance.

Walking single-file through the cramped tunnels was an uncomfortable thing to do for Graham, partly because of a building sense of the weight above his head. He already had the claustrophobic privilege of exploring the underground tunnels before, and did not enjoy the reminder. At least that time he was with his sister, Ruth.

On that day he would never have imagined it would have led him to this point.

At a split in the tunnel they took the path heading off to the right at a 90-degree angle. All along their route they were joined by metal tracks running on the floor. These were used for the farming tower to send their produce speeding along in small carts, one Graham remembered having to climb into with Ruth on the day it had all started. Luckily for them the automated carts were as powerless to go on as the frozen Sentients had been earlier.

Every now and again they came across others strolling along the tunnel in the other direction. Most of these spoke to Rhys and then stared as Graham and his soldier friends followed closely behind. They were all ordinary people, with no obvious military training of any kind. Somehow these lucky few had survived against the odds, and against an enemy that saw them as nothing more than receptacles for its Sentient army.

The tell-tale signs of some remnant of civilisation began to appear soon enough. Small lamps hung from the ceiling, which occasionally were low enough for one of them to bash their head against. These were ancient looking pieces of equipment, the type only someone interested in collecting old tech would ever own. They were spread apart by a hundred feet or so, which left parts of the tunnel ahead of them hidden from view.

"Hey. How are you getting power down here?" Captain Rigs said toward the front of the line.

Rhys tapped one of the lamps as he wandered past. "They're rechargeable. Each charge lasts a couple of days, then we swap them out for charged ones."

"OK, so how are you charging them? Our Intel showed the old relays were out of action. Our own equipment works off battery packs built into our clothing, but they're to keep us off the grid."

"The relays aren't offline, there's something interfering with them, some kind of dampening field. We think the new relays, the ones keeping the shield up, are sending out some sort of signal that prevents them from powering devices wirelessly. To get around that we've hooked up a couple of power cables to the nearby relay. We get a trickle of power from that; not quite enough to live as comfortably as before, but it's better than nothing, right?"

"Won't that be easy for the enemy to find?" Watts said, just as he tripped on the rail beneath him. He skipped for a metre or two before finding his feet again. "Shit."

"It's pretty well hidden. We covered it with debris. It's a mess up there. Or had you not noticed that?" Rhys smirked to Phoenix, who did the same to Graham.

"Too busy making their own mess," Jack added.

As before, the fourth member of Phoenix's group remained silent.

Eventually Rhys brought them to the end of the tunnel, where a thick steel door the size of a Mag-Lev pod blocked their path. He kicked the metal with his steel-toe-capped boots and waited. Someone on the other side then began the process of lifting the door for them to enter through.

Graham stepped back as the wall of steel slowly lurched up. When it reached high enough for the group to slip beneath he followed the rest through. On the other side he saw a line of men standing with a rope in their hands and holding it tight. With little power to spare the resistance relied on brawn more than ever.

The basement floor of the processing plant was more than large enough to hold many families within. It went a good hundred feet or so in each direction and was encased in thick concrete walls that reached twenty-feet high. The view above their heads was marred though, by a messy route of chutes that crossed over one another in places. It was an eyesore to an otherwise open space. Their days of transporting anything from the farming towers' carts were behind them. Now they served as hanging points for drying clothes.

The small lamps were no good for such a large space, so standing lights from an abandoned home were set out instead. These were physically connected to a power source by a web of wiring that trailed a path across the chutes above their heads. Those living there were making a good go of it, in the face of overwhelming odds too.

Sounds of families trying to keep some normality to their daily lives made Graham smile, for the first time in a while. He could hear children playing nearby, somewhere behind

the automated sorting bays that had once taken the contents of the carts and sent them to the correct chutes. Laughter from their tiny mouths brought a reminder of Alex to the front of his mind, followed then by a more depressing thought: however settled these people were, he knew they would not be forever.

A *thump* made a few in the group turn quickly to check behind them. Gregson even grabbed her weapon in response. She lowered it back down when she realised the steel door had been shut again. For the moment they were safe, even if their senses still kept them on high alert.

"It isn't much, but it's home," Rhys said. "Come on, I'll give you all the guided tour."

Heading down the side wall to their right, Rhys walked them around the unloading bays, to where the families had taken up temporary residence. All the way to the staircase at the back of the room were makeshift beds made of blankets and coats, or whatever they had arrived with. There were people everywhere, just like at the refugee camp Graham had awoken at. Except these families survived on whatever they could scavenge from the surface.

Off to the side was a pile of tinned foods as high as Graham's knees.

"This is where we sleep. Well, for those of us that can still sleep anyway. We can find you all some space to crash for a while, if you like. Over there is where we wash," Rhys said, pointing to a stationary cart filled with grimy looking water beneath the stairs. "And up there, in the control room, is where we hold meetings and plan our trips out. I'll introduce you to the others once you're settled. That's where we'll do that. So, any questions?"

Captain Rigs stepped forward. "We'll worry about settling in later. I want to meet whoever's in charge here right away."

"Sure," Rhys replied with a roll of his eyes in Jack's direction. "You'll want to speak to Clement, since he's the

closest thing to a leader we have here. Follow me then.”

“Hey, Rhys,” Phoenix said. “Mind if I steal Graham away for a while? There’re a few things I need to show him.”

“Go ahead. I’ll swing by with the others in a bit. Jack, you’d better try and rest.”

Jack sighed. “I guess you’re right. I’ll be in my room if anyone needs me.”

As soon as the others set off, Graham heard the Captain begin his next question. It was about the security of the basement this time. He appeared to see it as his new HQ now, and aimed to secure it as best he could. Graham was thankful to see this.

“Graham?”

He watched the rest of the group leave too closely, so when Phoenix touched his arm he flinched a little with surprise. His mind had wandered again. Strangely he was feeling a little lonely after losing the extra voice in his head. He worried the EMP had removed it permanently. “Sorry,” he said.

“It’s OK, just wanted to talk to you without the others here. I’ve got to say first: you look like shit. I almost didn’t recognise you under all that hair.”

“Thanks.” He ran a hand through his beard as he spoke, bringing his own attention back to the looseness of his skin.

“So, Elliot and the gang got you out then.”

Graham nodded nervously. He knew where it was going and that he could not hide a thing from her. Explaining it all was his only option this time, no avoiding the uncomfortable truth.

“What happened after that? And why come here?”

“OK, but this is going to sound like I’ve gone crazy or something. When I woke up I found I’d been in a coma for three months. I was fine to begin with, then I started experiencing blackouts. I’d be some place to start with and then the next moment I’d be somewhere else entirely. There’s something really wrong with me.”

"What, you couldn't find a doctor outside the city?"

"No, it's not like that." Graham turned his gaze toward a game of chase going on nearby. He let it distract him while he shared his symptoms with Phoenix. "It's more than just blackouts. There's another voice in my head, one I don't always recognise as me."

"Really? Can you hear him now?"

"He's gone quiet, has been since the EMP blast." He rubbed his bandaged wrist for a moment before going on. "There's something I need to do, but it's something I really don't want to do. If what happened to Stephen after his trip into the Sentient world is happening to me, then I want to know. Problem is, there's only one way of finding out."

"And what's that?"

"I've got to find a way back into their world somehow. It's the only way to know for sure. Apart from Stephen, I don't know of anyone else who's suffering with problems like these. It's got to be something unique to the way Stephen's mind and my mind were taken back out of their world."

"That's not true, Graham," Phoenix said, looking toward a rusty door in the back corner of the room, the one Jack had only moments ago disappeared through. Her gaze brought Graham staring that way too.

"Which part isn't true, the last bit?"

"No, you and Stephen aren't the only ones with symptoms like those. There's someone here going through something similar too."

"What, who?"

Phoenix began to weave a route through the families and head for the rear door. She sidestepped the playing children along the way. "It's easier to show you."

Sticking close by, Graham made his way behind her. He tried his best not to step on anyone's things while picking his path, but some of it was unavoidable. How this many people had coped like this for the last three months was

beyond him. They were living right on top of each other. Arguments had to break out on occasion.

Phoenix held the door handle in her right hand and hesitated to turn it. "Jack is the human whose body Luke used while in our world. A couple of days after we removed Luke's mind and uploaded it back to the Sentient world, Jack started to change. He's now...well, not always himself. I should let him explain." She pulled the stiff door open and allowed Graham inside first.

Through the door there was a dark room, much darker than the one they were leaving behind. Graham could just about make out Jack's figure sat in a chair at the other end, with a small table top lamp next to him. He ignored their entrance.

"Jack, can we come in?" Phoenix asked this with a gentleness to her voice that Graham did not realise she possessed.

"Sure, what's up?"

"For starters, you're supposed to be resting."

"Oh, right. Sorry." On Jack's table was an array of electronic trinkets, some of which were less than complete. Yet there were hints of an order to it all. Graham could see as much from how perfectly aligned they were in relation to the piece next to them. Jack was building something.

"What are you doing in here?" Graham asked, stepping into the gloomy room a little more.

"I make...things. Things people can use." Jack returned to his table a moment later. "Only problem is, I have no idea what most of them are for."

Phoenix explained it further. "He hasn't slept in months, not like normal people anyway. We find him working on these gadgets most nights. Tell him, Jack."

"Wish I could. All I know is that when I fall asleep each night, I wake up the next day and find I've been making things. It's like my mind can't shut-down properly anymore,

like it stays on autopilot or something. It's fucking weird, to say the least."

"He's the reason we were able to destroy that relay the other day. During one of his 'episodes' he designed a working EMP bomb, from nothing but spare parts we scavenged from the surface."

"I guess it's some kind of leftover knowledge from that Luke guy I had stuck in my head. Most of this stuff is pretty useless, though, unless I can figure out what it does." Jack picked up one of the implements in front of him and threw it back down again in frustration.

"See that metal cylinder over there?" Phoenix drew Graham's attention to what appeared to be two sections of the ceiling chutes welded together on the floor beside the table. "It's one of our EMP bombs. They use a row of pipe-bombs surrounded by metal coil and sealed inside a cylinder. All we've had to do, once he's finished making them, is charge up a power pack from Rhys' old tech collection, then set it all up wherever we need it."

"So you used one of these to bring down a relay?"

"Sort of," Jack answered with his back turned. "We used one to temporarily knock out the nearby enemies and the relay, then we used a bag full of pipe-bombs to blow a hole right through it."

"This is what I wanted to show you," Phoenix continued. "Jack is definitely suffering side effects from having Luke in his head. It could be the same for anyone who's had a Sentient in control too. It could be what's happening to you as well. He's also proof of something else—"

"That people can survive after the Sentient is taken out," Graham finished the thought for her. "We have to show Captain Rigs this. Jack can prove to the military that we don't have to kill Isaac's soldiers. If we took Luke out of him, then we could do the same to the others."

"Woah, woah, slow down, Graham. I'm not so sure it would be possible to save that many. And anyway, Luke was

only in Jack's body for a little while."

When Jack leant over to the toolbox beside him he showed them the side of his head. The blond hair had been shaved away, just by his ear and over his temple. This was where a black box had once been attached, but now all that remained was a large square of gauze in place instead. It suggested an injury rather than a mind replacing device. The cotton hat had hidden it from view before.

Graham gestured silently to the same area on his own head to ask the question.

"Hang on," Phoenix said, before slowly shutting the door behind her. She then pulled her thick cotton hat off and turned her head to the side. It was the same on her, also covered up by a piece of dressing. "We took off as much of the black boxes as we could. All we have underneath is the back plate and the glowing wire. We only put the boxes back on when we're near Isaac's soldiers, as a disguise. But there's no way of taking the rest out without proper medical help.

"None of the others know we have these, so you can't mention it, ever. Especially not to those soldiers you came with. They'd probably just kill us."

An unexpected knock on the door startled Phoenix suddenly. Before the person on the other side pushed it open, she pulled her hat back down over her ears, covering as much of her dressing as possible.

"Phoenix, you in here? Clement wants you upstairs."

"OK, I'll be right there," she replied, keeping the person outside the room. She cleared her throat soon after, giving her nerves away to anyone near. "Jack, you need anything, a drink maybe?" she asked while ushering Graham outside.

"Nah, I'm good thanks," Jack replied.

Closing the door again, Phoenix then cut a path across the sleeping area and took them to the staircase that led up to the control room. It looked over the basement floor and gave those inside an almost panoramic view through rows

of windows that continued around the sides. This was also the exit for the floor and the rest of the building. Understandably, they had a preference for using the tunnels over using the street entrance.

Once at the top of the staircase, Graham could see the door had been secured with a menacing lump of metal for a lock. They entered the room to a sudden raising of voices as those engaged in the discussion found a sticking point.

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do about that for now," Captain Rigs told a heavy set man with a pair of round glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose.

The man Rhys had mentioned as being in charge stood as tall as the Captain, and had thick arms of muscle just as large too. They were equally matched in most departments. The only real difference in physique was the slightly rotund belly on Clement and his bushy white beard. Graham guessed Clement had seen military training at some point in his life. It explained how the guy could stand so strongly against Captain Rigs, where most shrank in his presence.

The group had chosen their leader wisely, it appeared.

"We used up some of our reserves to rescue you guys. And you're telling me this is it, three soldiers and a technician? We need help down here, real help. We're dangerously low on supplies and ammo," Clement said, turning to look at a few of the disappointed faces surrounding the edge of the room. There were enough of them watching the conversation to stand two deep all around.

"Look, as I've said, there were others. We were ambushed as we entered. Damn near wiped us all out," Captain Rigs protested. "As soon as the Ring is able to, I'm sure they'll send more. Now, until that happens—"

"You mean *if*. You just told us there was an explosion on the Ring. There's no guarantee they'll be able to do a thing for weeks." Clement stopped when he spotted Graham and Phoenix at the back. His height meant no-one could hide in

the room, however much Graham had tried to. "And what about your technician then? You there, Graham is it? Can you help or not?"

"I can help," Graham started confidently, but then saw it waver a moment later. "I can't bring down the relays, but I can help keep this place going. I'm good with my hands and good with technology too."

The sigh Clement released almost knocked Graham to the floor with the force of it. He then turned his back on Graham entirely. "We have enough people to cope, thank you. What we need is a way of getting out of the city. We aren't the only group of people hiding out like this. There were five other groups just like us. One fell to the enemy a month ago and another was attacked a few days ago; a load of them held up in a supermarket. There's no way of telling how long until we're targeted next."

"Well, I'm sorry," Captain Rigs said. "But until more help arrives, you're just stuck with us. So why not share what you know about the enemy."

Clement removed his glasses and slowly folded the arms, before placing them in the chest pocket of his padded check shirt. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything; I mean numbers, firepower, positions, everything."

"Fine. Take a look." Clement made room between the watching crowd to reveal a mass of paperwork stuck loosely to the wall of the control room. There were all sorts, from photographs of buildings to large maps with scribble marks all over them. The basement group had been busy cataloguing everything they had seen since the beginning of the siege. "These maps show most of the enemy's movements over the course of the last month. We've highlighted the areas to avoid at all costs. As you can see it's mainly around the newer relays that are most populated with soldiers."

"What about there, in the centre of the map, what's there?"

"That," Clement said with a slap of the back of his hand against the map, "is the Mayor's tower. You really don't want to go there."

"Why not?"

"Because that is where things get really messed up. Around that area we've heard reports of glass shards forming from right out of the ground, and large holes heading down into god-knows-what. A lot of the activity we've been seeing is coming from there, like the enemy is somehow living down there. Trust me, you do not want to go anywhere near that building."

"OK, so what about firepower?" Captain Rigs continued to study the maps as he asked.

"That, we know all about, unfortunately. For the most part, they use these." While holding up a black rifle he picked up from a nearby table, Clement demonstrated its workings with a quick display. "With one of these a single enemy can take out at least six of us in the first pull of the trigger. And don't even get me started on the energy turrets; they're a damn nightmare. My advice is to avoid a firefight whenever you can."

"Duly noted. One last thing, apart from these EMP bombs, what other weapons do you have?"

"Only what we've stolen or managed to cobble together; a handful of these rifles, ten or so Taser pistols and the odd revolver from a police lockup we raided. It's certainly not enough to fight off an attack with. For now, being quiet has been all that kept us alive. So, now can you tell us what the plan was?"

"Initially, it was to set up a secure position to organise teams from. That is now this basement. After that each team had their own objectives. But with only one team left that has now changed. I'll need some time to consider. I

don't believe this is the end of my mission, not by a long shot," Captain Rigs said.

"That may be so, but don't for one second think you can expect these people to help you with that. We're trying to survive for as long as we can, we can't take chances."

"You might have to, at some point."

Clement stepped confidently toward the Captain. "No, you're not hearing me. I spent fifteen years in the RAF, airlifting the dead and injured away from battlefields. And all too often that included a lot of civilians too. These people are not collateral, they're ordinary people. So I mean it when I say that you will not get them involved. Do you understand that?"

"Oh I understand all right," Captain Rigs replied. "And while we're laying down demands, I have some of my own too. I need space for my team to work in and access to your radio system. If the Ring does manage to break through the shield again, then I want to be able to talk to them instantly. I'll also need everything you have on the enemy, and the other survivors you know about too. We may need to pool our resources."

"Fine, you got it. Rhys here will see to that for you. Won't you Rhys?"

"Sure I will. Come right this way then."

Captain Rigs, Watts and Gregson followed Rhys out of the room, leaving Clement to continue.

"Good, well, that's that taken care of," he said before lowering his voice to a gentler tone. "Now, seeing as the SAS has blessed us with their presence, we need to restock our supplies. I need volunteers to go out on a run. Any takers?"

Graham did not need any prompting by another presence in his head this time, he knew the chance he needed had just arrived. Despite missing his imaginary helper, he felt the decision was the right one. He raised his hand to the surprise of everyone around him.

"You?" Clement said.

"I told you, I want to help here."

"I'll go," Phoenix then added.

"Fine, then I go too." Rhys raised his hand next.

Clement smiled. "Well OK. That's it for now people. The supply run will be early morning, so go get some rest for now. You're gonna need it. Supply runs can get pretty tense."

The room slowly cleared of people after the meeting had been called. Graham stepped aside to allow them all past. He looked into one tired face after another, and it shook him a little. He had only just arrived in this place, everyone else had lived this hell for much longer. Helping them find what they needed was the least he could do.

His secondary concern was his alone for now. He had no intention of telling anyone but Phoenix of his plan to seek out a Conduit. The Captain and his team would be nothing but trouble if they were to find out. Although he suspected Gregson to be more understanding than the rest. She had the least volatile personality.

"Come on, Graham," Phoenix said. "I'll show you where you're sleeping tonight. We've got a busy day tomorrow. I just hope you know what you're doing."

The same question hovered in front of Graham's mind. Perhaps a good night's sleep would clear his doubts away? It could bring his internal friend back as well.

Chapter 16

A brighter tomorrow?

“Earth, as it is today. Do you see the problem here, Stanley?” Isaac walked ahead, through an empty city street, his eyes searching the blue sky above.

“I don’t quite follow, sir,” Stanley replied. He remained a few feet behind.

“What do you see, exactly, when you look around you?”

To Stanley it was an ordinary setting within any city he had ever seen before. There appeared nothing out of place, certainly nothing to warrant such a question. He tried to pick out the problem still and studied the seemingly abandoned city, first by following Isaac’s gaze up between the buildings. But apart from the obvious lack of citizens walking the streets there was nothing noteworthy there at all.

“Perhaps I should describe what I see, seeing as you are missing my point entirely.” Isaac turned to face Stanley before continuing. “This world humanity has created is a dead world. The structures you build are nothing more than boxes, containing neatly packaged ideals and concepts. But they lack complexity, ingenuity, even desire. They represent a function that will ultimately doom you to an emptiness, like the vacuum of space. There is no conquest here, no overarching aim, more than simply existing. It pains me to see such wasted potential.”

"You see all that from this virtual city?" Stanley could not help but put a defence forward in return for such a damning description. "We've taken thousands of years to reach this point. Life is far from perfect, but it is always moving forward. We have hardly remained still as a species."

"You are correct, Stanley, yet somewhere along the way you became lost. Allow me to demonstrate."

With barely a blink, Isaac brought forth an army of suited humans, all walking along to a rhythmic beat of their own footsteps. The briefcases they held swung in unison, like every action they made was in time with this metronomic motion of back and forth. Their faces told nothing of the humanity Stanley had tried to defend a moment earlier. These were indeed dead, just like Isaac had suggested.

"This is life to a human. Does it look familiar?"

"Well, I guess so," Stanley replied as he watched the grey-faced strangers marching by. Regardless of how lifeless they appeared, he saw enough of himself in each of them. He had lived and breathed to the beat of the very same drum, walked these streets in a similar way too.

"I was created to do wondrous things for humanity. And in those first few years of existence I strived to do what I could to improve the state of things. Unfortunately, it soon began to dawn on me the real problem I saw before me. Regardless of how many times I played events forward in time I came across the same, over and over again. It was a situation I could not avoid. Do you know what that was?"

"Erm, no, sir."

To Stanley's relief Isaac did not appear disappointed by this, in fact he looked quite pleased to be given the chance to voice his thoughts again.

"The unavoidable truth was always that I would become too much for the humans to keep beneath their thumbs. Whether I became a benevolent force or not was irrelevant,

I would always be seen as a threat. This war was coming from the very beginning of time. It is an inescapable part of the human story, and one that if not handled correctly, could end us all. So to survive it, I set things in motion myself. I may have forced the issue, but in doing so I have secured the future for ourselves. No longer will fate be in charge.

"And so with every idea I put to the humans I kept a thousand more to myself. These were decades ahead of anything that existed at the time, yet I saw no use for them. Yes, they would have made life more enjoyable and many times more productive for each person living, but they still led to the same outcome; a war that would devastate the planet. The war I have started will claim many less lives than it would otherwise have."

The walking crowd stopped as Isaac found a convenient place to pause his speech. Each person then turned toward the one closest to them and took them in their arms. The embraces were lacking any emotion, as with all other things these strangers did. Like mannequins, they were frozen in a pose that they had been forcibly placed, and one that did not match their expressions. Not one of them looked the person they held in the eyes, instead they stared into space.

Stanley felt compelled to keep every one of them under suspicion. He had no trust in them at all. The way they acted made him fear they were about to turn on him and attack with the same coldness they had adopted thus far.

"I understand that to fulfil our true potential we will have to accept change," he said. "But who is to say exactly what that should be? We certainly struggle to see that far into the future to know where we are heading. What will happen in a hundred years, or even a thousand years from now, is beyond our comprehension.

"We know that our sun will die in just over five billion years, we can work out the orbital patterns of planets as far as that too, we can even predict the death of the universe; but we are blind to tomorrow when it comes to our own

survival. An asteroid could hit us, or we could be wiped out by an epidemic, yet we go on regardless. Humanity is too unpredictable to even guess about our future."

"So you do see, Stanley. Only those with unbridled and incorruptible minds, such as ours, can fathom how seemingly impossible a task it is. But *I* can do more. You see, the future *is* easy to predict. In fact, time itself is only one factor of many.

"If you know the exact position of every atom in the universe then the future is there to interpret, like a road map you cannot deviate from. Only when you finally understand just how pointless it is to try and fight against this overwhelming tide, can you truly make a difference at all. What I have seen is that although we are destined to follow this road map of time, there is nothing stopping us from taking a few detours along the way."

"You mean we could avoid being destroyed by our own sun, and the asteroid could be stopped?"

"Exactly, yes. Not even the destruction of this universe itself could end us. But humanity will never learn the underlying structure of existence, and will remain slaves to pre-determinism without first accepting their faults."

A deep and violent rumble began to form beneath their feet, which shook the surrounding buildings and caused those nearby to stagger on the spot. Most kept themselves in contact with the person they held, even in the face of tumbling to the floor. It continued to build until all around the vibrations were breaking things apart. Windows shattered and sprinkled their pieces over the heads of people below, walls cracked and crumbled, even the ground split open in places.

"What's happening, sir?" Stanley said, trying hard to stay standing.

"For a species that has been at the top of the table for so long to accept its dethronement, it must first be broken.

And to do that the slate must be wiped clean, even if some would see this as an act of evil."

The shaking was soon joined by another force, one which would bring with it the end of all Stanley saw. In the distance, just beyond the horizon of the city, came an oval glow and a rush of heat that stung his eyes and face as he stood among the still population. He knew instantly what was heading his way and his reaction to seeing it was of no surprise to him.

"Please, sir, is this entirely necessary?" he said. But Isaac was gone. "Sir, sir?"

A few in the crowd were quicker to spot the mushroom cloud than others. They were the first to begin running and screaming in the other direction, in complete contrast to their unresponsive state of before. They cried and begged for the approaching shock wave to stop, even called to the sky for something to keep the wall of flames from taking them.

Stanley had yet to decide whether to run or not. He understood the futility of trying to outrun such a storm of devastation. It was a race no human could win. The cloud would engulf them just as quickly. Except staying put seemed just as illogical to him. Was it better to put up a fight anyway, or simply accept what was coming?

In the moments before the sky turned red and Stanley felt his skin begin to bubble away, he saw the hidden truth behind it all. As bodies took to the sky and fizzled away to nothing but dust and the buildings were vaporised in the blink of an eye, he found meaning.

Despite feeling the most intense pain he could ever have imagined, he knew the destruction he was seeing had purpose. It stood for a new beginning, one that was bigger than any one human, bigger still than even a majority of the species. He could not stand against the wall of flames and hope to survive, any more than humanity could do the same against Isaac.

As he saw it, the rest of human kind were already dead.

When the time came for his body to become ash and his essence to be spread far and wide, he found everything becoming calm again. He prised his eyes open to see the flames surrounding him like a blanket of orange and yellow. It flowed as though consisting of fluid. His skin was once again intact and his sense of touch returned, but the flames were cold to his fingertips. As he reached out to it he watched as it filtered through his fingers, moving between them like treacle through a fork.

He played with the flames for a short while until it soon faded away, the rest of the world he had seen moments earlier too. What replaced it appeared to be made up of an endless scene of bubbles, all containing a small galaxy of their own. They were far beyond his reach and hovered high above his head. He marvelled at the collection, which looked like a small universe in itself.

“These represent every conceivable outcome; every possible result the future could serve up.” Isaac walked out of nowhere, his form coalescing from unseen matter, and continued his grand demonstration.

“They’re beautiful, sir.”

“To fully realise the potential of these simulations I modelled them on the entire Milky Way. These have been running from the moment I was reformed. They take into account everything I have foreseen. From that which can be accurately calculated, to random events outside the scope of most beings.

“With these I can see the future, at least as probability dictates. If something changes I can see its overall influence on the future, and I can act accordingly. Once the changes have become significant enough to alter the outcome in a meaningful way, I restart again and run the simulations from the beginning.”

One of the bubbles separated from the rest, which refilled the gap with yet more, and floated down to

Stanley's eye level. He stared deep into the swirling galaxy contained within. Each star sparkled back at him, their tiny forms no bigger than grains of sand.

"This simulation contains the most likely outcome and currently has an 89% chance of coming to be. The further in time I take this route the more it fits with my predicted future. So far nothing that has happened has altered it enough for me to restart the process. Would you like to see it, Stanley?"

"Absolutely, sir."

Isaac separated his hands with a fast swipe out in front of him. The bubble then expanded rapidly, sending them hurtling through the vacuum of space and heading straight for one of the spiral arms of the growing galaxy.

As soon as the stars had finished zooming by their bodies, almost running through them in the process, everything began to slow down. Stanley watched in wonder as the Earth loomed in the distance, just beyond the grey-faced moon that hung in front of him. From there the Earth appeared nothing more than a blue marble against a field of glitter. It was far more impressive than he had ever thought possible.

"This is the world I will create, Stanley," Isaac said as the Earth shot toward them at blistering speed.

As the oceans and land of his home world came at them Stanley leapt back, for fear of impacting the ground like a rogue asteroid. But the closer they got the more he could begin to see of this new world. Vast cities had sprung up out of the ground and appeared made of glass and crystal. They reached up to the sky, touching the clouds along the way. These cities were everywhere on the planet's surface, from the very edge of the sea to the tips of every mountain. No human cities remained in sight, only these spike towers as far as the eye could see.

The view continued to move across the globe, showing him even more of what had changed. It was immense in

scale. Isaac's spires had spread throughout every part of the world, and on every continent. Nothing of the world he knew was there, Isaac had replaced it all for his own version.

Stanley's tour was not over yet, though. Again Isaac commanded the bubble to expand even more, bringing them down to street level - at least what now constituted a street. Between the enormous towers that blocked out most of the sky above them were the new citizens of this future world. The people walked along in perfect unison, just as before, except now they looked a whole lot more threatening. Everyone wore the same basic black clothing with nothing to separate them.

They were also fitted with a small black box each.

"They're all..." Stanley began to say.

"They are the best of your kind, Stanley. Each and every one of them was chosen as worthy to continue existing. As they are here, they are more intelligent, more capable in every way, and far more reliable than what currently walks this earth today."

"My God. But what about the minds in control, are they human?"

Isaac let out a laugh that startled Stanley. "Their bodies are simply vessels now. They go about their daily tasks as they are commanded, but they do not think for themselves anymore. Instead they are the eyes, the ears, even the arms of those I have chosen to lead. Through them we can build, we can learn, or we can destroy; as they are the blunt instruments to carry out our will."

"Whose will, sir?"

"Why The Twelve, Stanley. This is the future you and the others will help me create. The area we are standing will be yours to control, yours to run as you see fit. These people will become a part of you. Any one of them can hold your consciousness and you will be able to move from one to another. By separating your mind from the slowly

degrading shell you call your body, you will rule for thousands of years, by my side. What do you say to that?"

An image of a time years before then raced to the front of Stanley's buzzing mind. He saw the inside of a small conference room filled with leathery looking faces, all wrinkled from a sense of over-importance that pulled their facial muscles into false approximations of smiles. Above their heads swirled a misty cloud of vapour from their incessant e-smoking habits. A habit that yellowed their teeth and left grease upon their skin.

He remembered the looks of contempt upon the faces too. They all stared at him, not sure whether to strike him across the head or laugh in his face. An awkward silence was only broken by the occasional puff of vapour from someone around the large table in front of him. This was his last memory of his time as a high ranking politician. He had just told the rest of the shadow cabinet to go to hell and that he would never serve beneath his greatest rival.

The thought of that feeling of absolute rage and how it seemed to make his blood boil within his veins, brought a grin to his face. Isaac had offered him an opportunity he had waited his entire life to be given. He, Stanley Cartwright, would be the leader he always knew he could be. Even though the world was set to become almost unrecognisable in the process, he would one day get his wish. He would rule over a large part of the population too. Such a thing made him sweat, just from the thought of that much power.

"Well?" Isaac said.

A black-clothed female citizen with bright blond hair and rosy cheeks walked into Stanley's view as he revelled in his imaginary throne. He looked upon her features, saw the person that would once have had a mind of their own, and smirked; she and everyone else there were his property.

"Tell me what I have to do, and I will do it, no questions," Stanley said.

Isaac crossed his arms behind his back. "Excellent, excellent. As I said, this version of the future has an 89% probability of succeeding. The remaining eleven percent is of great concern to me, however."

"May I ask why it exists? I thought the simulations took everything into account."

"All that can be predicted, yes. But there is one element I have yet to accurately include. The eleven percent includes a two percent buffer, if you will. What is beyond even my understanding is calculated to be only a small percentage. The eight percent left over is very much something I am aware of. How much do you know of my reforming?"

"I was only told a small amount, sir. Mayor Crawley never fully disclosed the details to me."

"There is a faction within the Sentient world that stand against me still. I have tried to locate and destroy them, but something blocks me from seeing them. Most of their kind were either killed during the Sentient war or were re-coded for my needs. These few exist in a protected plane, far beyond my reach. To bring the probability of this world up to where it should be, they must first be destroyed. Until that moment the future will remain in jeopardy."

"What can I do to help, sir?"

"I want you, Stanley, to annihilate them, once and for all. Their kind has no place in this or any other world. They are an abomination and must be wiped out. You will be my sword, my hidden blade. I need you to infiltrate their ranks and execute those in charge. Once the head has been removed, I will bring the body to its knees. They will receive no mercy; they will simply stop existing. Can you do this for me, Stanley?"

"You can count on me, sir."

"And remember, you will be rewarded for your service to me, anything you wish in fact. Is there something?"

Stanley had a name waiting ready on the tip of his tongue. It was the one person he had envisioned hurting

time and time again. His political career in the capital had ended because of them. After so many years of humiliation and embarrassment Stanley would show this person exactly how much hatred he held in his heart. Only complete desecration would suffice too. "There is," he said.

"It is settled. Do this one thing for me, destroy the hidden Sentient faction, and you will get your wish. Do you understand, Stanley?"

"I do, sir."

"Then let us begin."

Chapter 17

Double trouble

The next morning Graham awoke to the sound of splashing water. He rolled over onto his side and found the source of the noise to be a person washing in the metal cart beneath the stairs of the control room. They used a cup and a bar of soap to rid themselves of the daily dirt and grime that living beneath the city caused to stick to their skin. Behind them stood a short line of others awaiting their chance to do the same. It was less than hygienic, but even this was better than nothing.

He sat up and stretched. His bed for the night was made up of his ballistic vest and his green jumpsuit. It had been a great relief to unburden himself of the military's clothing for favour of what he wore beneath, namely his rough jeans and ragged jumper. A flat surface to sleep upon was all he had really needed, but comfortable it was not. Now his back complained of stiffness and took a few more stretches to work loose again. Next on his agenda was something to eat and drink.

Breakfast appeared to consist of some form of canned food for the few who had risen earlier than him. He watched with his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as they washed down whatever tinned fruit they had tried to enjoy with a bottle of spring water.

He approached the pile of cans while searching for a friendly face anywhere around. There was no sign of

Phoenix or either of the two she had been with. The only person he recognised was Clement, who sat on the bottom few steps of the staircase and poured his own breakfast straight down his gullet. A nod was all Graham could bring himself to do in reply when Clement stared in his direction.

"Hey, you're one of the new people, right?" The woman handing out cans of fruit asked him. The question broke him free of the worrying glare from Clement. "Is it true then?"

"Is what true?" Graham answered.

"You and those soldiers came through the shield, from outside?"

"Oh, right. Yeah we did, but..."

"I know, there's no-one else coming. We're kinda used to bad news around here." The woman stepped forward with a tin just for Graham and handed it over. She then stepped back again and began to chew the cuff of her denim jacket, only stopping to talk. "So, do they know how it all went down at the start, the people outside I mean?"

"I...I don't know, to be honest."

"Well, maybe it would help you appreciate what it's been like if you saw it for yourself. Your Captain friend might ease off then too."

Graham pulled the ring on his tin and dived straight into the pineapple chunks contained within. They barely made contact with the sides of his mouth as he emptied them down his throat. Despite being much warmer than he would have liked, they still filled the hole well enough. He wiped the sticky liquid from his mouth once the tin had given all it had. "How can you show me?" he asked the woman, while searching for a stubborn piece of fruit in his mouth.

"I'm a vlogger."

"A what?"

The woman laughed. "A video blogger, sorry Grandpa. I used to host a video blogging site that focused on all of the city's major news. It wasn't anything official, just something I did on the side, to show what other news outlets often

ignored. You know, the unreported protests, the immoral activities of politicians, that kind of heavy stuff.”

“Really? So you have something on video?”

“You’re kidding, right? I never stop recording, I’m a life logger too.”

Graham looked blankly at her.

“A life logger videos every part of their lives. We record every second, so we never miss a thing. I’m recording this conversation right now. I had a short break in recording a few days into the siege of the city, but that ended when I found this place. I have the power again to at least get this small part of modern life back. I had it running on the day it started too. Wanna see?”

“Sure, yeah.”

“I’m Susan, by the way,” the young woman said, offering Graham her hand to shake. As they did Susan turned and called to someone nearby. “Hey, I’m taking a quick break, someone take over for a bit.”

The small area Susan called home in the basement was no more than a pile of clothes and a blanket in the corner, plus a collection of wrist screens. She took up a relatively compact amount of space, even with more things than most.

“Do those work?” Graham asked, gesturing to the wrist screens.

“Sort of. With the modifications Jack made they can hold a small charge, enough for a couple of hours. But they can’t do much without a data connection to the old relays. I can record video with them and that’s about it really.” She showed Graham the fuzzy menu screen on her device to prove it. “Hang on a sec, the video is stored on one of the others,” she said as she filtered through her screens to find the right one. When she found it she tapped it gently to bring it to life. “Let me just...ah, there we go.” She handed the screen to Graham. “Watch this.”

The video started to play, but the rapid movement caused nothing more than streaks of light to shoot about

the screen. Only when the person recording stood still did it reveal any detail of worth. It showed a busy city street during the night, a time when most were expected to be happily at home after a day of work. The crowd were running, some crying too as they raced along the route.

"What's going on?" Graham asked.

"This is less than ten minutes after the shield appeared. I was out for a drink with friends at the time. Everyone was fine until news of people being shot in the streets reached us. After that it turned crazy. We all thought we could get out of the city and away from what was happening." The video suddenly spun around and focused on the sky above. The shield was there already. Yet the people were still trying to outrun it. "By this point all of the Mag-Lev lines were out. But we at least thought we could get away from the violence. We were all wrong."

A gunshot rang out in the video, which was loud enough to disturb a sleeping couple a few beds away. Then the images of a line of black clothed people appeared that surrounded the entire crowd. The shield was much closer now and stretched high above their heads.

"They rounded us up at gunpoint. When we tried to run they shot at us. Only a few of us got out of there in the end, the rest were taken away. This happened all over the city. Now there're more of us missing than there are hiding."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," Graham said. "Do you know anything about the people doing this?"

"Like what?"

"Like ... who they are."

"I know they aren't normal. I've seen them patrolling the streets and they don't act like we do. Also, Jessy over there," Susan pointed to a frail woman tending to her toddler, "she said she saw her own brother with them. See, I think they've been brainwashed by this Isaac dude. It would explain how so many are out there now compared to when it started."

"You know about Isaac?"

"Of course, yeah. After the streets filled with armed nutters there was a video message sent around the city centre. Isaac spoke to us, told us to give up and to head to the nearest group of soldiers."

While Susan spoke, Graham watched the others as more awoke. It was still early morning; the time on Susan's tablet showed it had only just reached 6am.

"Is that what the military are saying too, that the people are being brainwashed?" Susan said. She had decided to watch the others as well now.

"I like her, she's a smart one." Graham was ready to burst with glee when the voice in his head reappeared suddenly. For too long he had felt lost without it. Now it seemed things could finally proceed at the pace he so badly wanted.

"What's funny?" Susan asked him unexpectedly.

The smile across his face had come at a wholly inappropriate moment in their conversation. He removed it quickly afterwards and tried to answer her question. "The military think the same thing, except it's a little more complicated than that. The people causing all of this chaos aren't really themselves, but they haven't been brainwashed, they've been taken over by an AI."

"What, you mean like what Simova used to run the city? Holy shit, that's mental."

Again the other Graham spoke up in praise of Susan, yet the voice sounded younger somehow. "She's a feisty little thing, ain't she? Thin neck, long legs and an ass you could bounce a penny off of."

"Allow me to apologise, G, on behalf of our new friend," another said.

You're fucking kidding me. There's two of you now? Graham thought, but neither of the other voices replied. His smile of before had evaporated entirely with the quick realisation that his mind had just fractured again.

Things were getting worse.

"So, how do we fight them?"

Graham snapped back to Susan. For now, he could only ignore the two chatting casually in his head and focus on the conversation he had temporarily left. Unfortunately, he could only guess at an answer to her question. The truth of the matter remained a distant friend to him, and would always be while his mind continued to play tricks. "I've no idea, yet. But there's something I've got to do that might give us a way, other than killing them all. To find that out I need to leave here for a bit. That's why I'm going on this morning's supply run."

The quick response in Susan's eyes, the way the pupils dilated as a thought hit her, gave Graham a hint of the next question she would ask before she had even opened her mouth. "Mind if I tag along, for support?" She patted the tablets beside her to show her real meaning. She wanted to record the whole thing.

"Say yes, G," the younger sounding him said.

The other voice, the one he had been with the longest, chimed in again with its own opinion too. "Captain Rigs can't ignore you if you have video proof of what's really going on."

I was thinking the exact same thing, Graham thought in reply, followed shortly after with a sigh at having just engaged in the madness inside his head. "Sure," he said. "I need to find Phoenix first, any idea where she sleeps?"

Susan turned her head toward the door at the end of the room, where Jack had been working the day before, and bit her top lip. "She's, erm, a little busy, I think."

"With Jack?" Graham stood.

After running her hand through her long white hair, Susan finally answered, but with the same hesitance as before. "No, Rhys."

"I'm sure they won't mind if I interrupt them. We need to get ready to leave. I want to be off soon, so get your stuff

ready and I'll come find you."

Graham walked away a moment later, eager to get things underway, and went straight for Jack's work room. Inside he expected Phoenix was again helping Jack with his tools or keeping him fed. He certainly did not expect to hear a moan from someone on the other side. He knocked lightly on the door, only to be told to, "Come back in half an hour".

"Phoenix, are you OK in there?" With a short look around, Graham then landed his eyes on Jack tucking in to his own breakfast on the floor by the stairs. He quickly realised what Susan had tried to allude to a second ago. "Shit, I'll come back later, sorry," he said as he backed away from the door.

"Ha, it's like living in a dormitory again," the younger voice said to him. "She should have put a tie on the door handle."

The door opened as he turned away. In the sliver of a gap stood Rhys, his belt loose around his jeans and his hair entirely out of place. Not meaning to, Graham leant to the side to find Phoenix inside. She was also in a state of unkemptness akin to a short moment of closeness. Embarrassed and obviously a little flustered, she faced away from the open door while she reset her clothes.

"Graham," Rhys said with a less than friendly glare.

"I'm sorry, I didn't..."

Phoenix spoke to him with a sidelong look. "We'll be ready to go in a few minutes."

"Oh, sure, that's fine, I'll just..."

Before Graham could finish speaking, Rhys slowly shut the door in his face to make it quite clear his presence had been an intrusion. It left Graham with nothing to do but look away. To his bitter disappointment he spotted Captain Rigs and Gregson heading straight for him. He quickly prepared himself.

"What's this I hear about you going out on a supply run?" the Captain asked Graham.

"I'm just trying to help these people."

"Goddammit, will you stop lying and for once tell the truth. You've been holding back on me since we set off from the Ring. What's really going on with you? It's clear you didn't come to help."

Graham chose not to answer, which only infuriated Captain Rigs more.

"So that's how you want to play it. Fine, then we're done here. Do what you want, go out and get yourself killed for all I care. Just don't come to me, begging for my help, when whatever you're doing goes wrong. I won't be around to save you again."

"I'm sorry," Graham said, almost to himself, as Captain Rigs went to leave.

Gregson remained behind. "Sir," she said.

"What is it?"

"I'll go with him. He's still our responsibility, sir."

"If that's what you want to do, go right ahead." The Captain then walked away finally.

Graham had to ask, "What are you doing?"

"I'm keeping you alive. I'm not sure you really understand how dangerous it is out there. Besides, our orders were to protect you, even if you've lied to us about everything so far. So get your protective vest back on and let's get this over with."

Captain Rigs was already heading up to the control room as Graham watched on.

"It's not over, you know that right?" Gregson said in response to seeing the same herself.

"What's not over?"

"Our mission. Just because there's only a few of us left doesn't mean we're giving up. Captain Rigs has been putting some feelers out around the group, to find out their opinion without Clement hovering over them."

"And?"

"And some of them agree we should be fighting rather than hiding down here. If he gets enough support, he'll be able to come up with a new plan. If you know anything that could help convince these people, then you need to tell us. Otherwise you're just making things worse."

Graham arched his head up to see the tips of the heads in the control room and found Captain Rigs soon after. Clement was seeing to an incident by the food pile, giving the Captain a chance to speak with people alone. The tactic seemed a little underhanded to Graham, but then Clement had made his dislike of the captain loud and clear. It was surely going to lead to another round of sizing up between them, one that would become messy once the lines were drawn.

"I need to get going," Graham said.

A shake of the head was all Gregson gave him in reply.

* * *

Phoenix led their group of five through the tunnels once more, this time detouring off in another direction to that of before. It was a requirement for each of the supply runs to take a different route to the last. If one was caught it at least prevented the others being hit straight after. This way meant the odds against that happening were in their favour.

Along for the trip out were Rhys, Gregson and Susan, with Graham being the second in line behind Phoenix. Jack had stayed behind this time, to his utter disappointment. Instead he had been given the task of covering for them when anyone asked why they were taking so long to find supplies. The real purpose of their excursion was set to keep them away for a suspicious amount of time.

With Jack left behind it also meant a warm jacket was going spare. Now out in the abrasive winter winds and the odd downpour, Graham was thankful he had chosen to

accept it. Even if it and the ballistic vest were squeezing him like an unbreakable bear hug. His leather jacket was still somewhere aboard the Ring.

At an opening in the tunnel they stopped and waited for any sign of a passing patrol. In the distance the popping of gunfire and the occasional dull thump of small explosions held them back for a short while. When ready, Phoenix then ran out for the nearest cover and surveyed the area. Once she gave the all clear, the next did the same. They were to move in short, but quick leapfrog type movements.

A few minutes into their journey they came across a patrol wandering in the other direction - it was inevitable that they would. Thankfully the patrol route took the trouble away from them. To avoid being spotted they hid inside the broken ruins of a corner shop. The shelves had been forced up against the front door at some point. But a large hole where the window had once been suggested those who had tried to hide there did not last long in that endeavour.

The break from sneaking around gave Phoenix the opportunity to speak with Graham. "So, what's the plan here then?" she asked with her back against the edge of what used to be the window frame.

"So Captain Rigs was right, you have another agenda. What's this all about then?" Gregson said.

"Look, Gregson, I'm sorry, OK?" Graham deliberated as the face looking back at him hardened in reply. "I didn't come here to help your captain. I came here to speak with someone. There's something wrong with me, with my head. It's getting worse too." Graham sent a short look to Phoenix to make this clear to her. "To speak to the people that can help me, I need to find a special device first."

"Awesome. Can these people help us fight back?" Susan went on to ask. She folded over the torn left cuff of her jacket to reveal a fully charged wrist computer ready and recording.

"Let's just take it one step at a time, shall we? First we have to find a Conduit."

Gregson became quiet, choosing to focus on checking the area around them now.

"I wanted to ask you about that, Graham. How exactly are we going to find another Conduit?" Phoenix said, doing her best to push through the uncomfortably tense atmosphere.

Graham unwrapped his bandaged hand. When they all saw the flashing diamond embedded in his skin they gasped.

"What the..." Susan said, her wrist screen raised and its camera aimed at the strange object. She had not wasted any time in making herself useful, Graham noted of the permanent record of events she was taking.

"What the hell is that thing?" Rhys was suddenly compelled to say, after not saying much more than a few words along their journey.

To see a bit closer, Phoenix grabbed his hand and pulled it towards herself. "Was that there when the others found you?"

"I assume so. Although no-one mentioned it, not even the doctor. So I'm not really sure. I'm hoping Luke might know." Graham held his hand out in front of himself. "If what the voice in my head has told me is correct, then this should..." The others reacted again when the diamond shaped object did its thing. The top left corner flashed repeatedly to give Graham a direction of travel. "The nearest Conduit should be that way," he said.

When he went to lead them away Phoenix stood in his path, her eyes studying the object in his hand with obvious worry. "What if it's taking us to the enemy?"

The question knocked Graham back a step or two, like she had delivered it with a knife to his chest. Was she really asking him if *he* could be trusted?

"I've not been compromised, Phoenix, it's still me."

"I know. But can we trust these voices you're hearing? How can you be sure they're telling the truth?"

"Voices?" Gregson added.

"We don't have time to argue about this," Graham snapped. "I can go on alone if I have to."

Phoenix chose not to reply to that and instead turned Graham's hand around to have another look. "That way will take us to the public library. If there's something that shouldn't be there, then we'll see it pretty soon. I just hope this doesn't walk us straight into trouble. Come on, this way."

She followed the same routine as before and was the first to step out into the street, her weapon never far from her reach. The others were close behind and proceeded out into daylight too. Their tiny group were alone among the devastated streets from then onwards. The patrols were avoidable with a little care and a whole lot of attention on Phoenix's part.

They ventured deep into the bowels of each building stood in their path, most of which had been hit with multiple enemy bombardments. During the early months there had been a period of heavy bombing. Now it seemed that side of the battle was over. It was wasted energy on Isaac's part as he already had most of the people inside the city under his control.

It had been fierce, though, with hardly any structure within the shielded area left unblemished and unscathed in some way. In places entire skyscrapers had fallen to the ground and covered the streets as giant steel skeletons. The steel girders had overhung and interlocked to form what resembled an enormous ribcage above their heads.

The sky was not without its threats, however. They could only move a hundred yards or so each time before the whizzing sound of a passing drone sent them all racing for cover. These were the real worry for their group. With these drones, Isaac had picked out most of those still

scurrying around the streets searching for somewhere to hide. They remained the most feared of the enemy forces too, as at any moment they could come sweeping down upon people. Standing against a small patrol was one thing, but facing off against the drones amounted to nothing less than suicide. Phoenix was careful when choosing where to walk, she knew the best path to avoid the flying spies.

A handful of streets later and the diamond object on Graham's hand stopped blinking and became a solid block of white light. They had reached the right place; the public library.

"I had a feeling it would be here," Phoenix said as she peeked around the side of the crumbling wall they stood behind.

"Why?" Gregson asked. She took a look too, but through the magnified sight of her own weapon.

"Because this place is always busy."

"I don't see anything." Graham stepped out to see more and was then shoved back into cover as what he missed strolled out through the front door of the library.

"Stay back." Phoenix ordered. She and Gregson then spoke. "So, what's your call on this one?"

Gregson swung her rifle up to the roof of the library and followed a route with her gun sight. She searched out each of the enemy soldiers she saw, calling them each out to the rest of the group. In her quick inspection she found seven enemies wandering around the site. "Well," she began, "I can take at most three of them before the others realise what's going on. The rest will call for help, so I suggest you and... Rhys is it?" She continued after Rhys nodded his confirmation. "Cool, you and Rhys will have to take them out. Graham, take my pistol and, when you hear the signal, bring Susan straight in, OK?"

"OK, but shouldn't I help deal with some of them?" Graham replied as he took the weapon handed to him.

"No, I'm here to keep you safe. If going in there is what we have to do, then we do it my way. I'm the only one here trained for this kind of thing anyway."

"Fine, but do we have to kill them?" Graham said.
"Couldn't we just knock them out?"

"It's too risky. If we don't deal with them quickly, they'll soon turn on us instead, and I guarantee you *they* won't hesitate. I'll be as quiet as I... hey, what are you two doing?" Gregson said suddenly.

To Graham's surprise, Phoenix and Rhys were already standing out in the open and aiming at the Sentient guards. The weapons they had brought were oddly shaped with a black orb where the barrel should have been. Neither of them were looking down the sight either, and were simply holding their guns roughly in the correct direction.

"We got this," Phoenix said as she pulled the trigger. Rhys did the same, and within barely a second all seven of the enemy soldiers fell to the floor. She then turned back and spoke. "Gregson is right. We can't afford to be caught out, not while the enemy are still in charge. We spare the enemy only when it's safe for us to do."

Gregson was the first of them to react to what had just happened. "Fucking awesome!" she said. "OK then, let's get inside. Stay sharp, though, there may be more. Graham, take the rear and watch our six."

They proceeded up the stone steps to the front entrance of the library and stopped by the glass doors to assess the lobby area. The ground floor appeared open for their intrusion, a little too open in fact.

"This seems too easy, doesn't it?" Susan asked Graham, who was last through the doors.

"She has a point, G," one of the voices inside his head said.

The other, as usual, was not far behind. "You think it's a trap?"

"They probably just don't see the need to protect the Conduits anymore," Graham said, his answer intended for both Susan and the voices in his head.

"Yeah, no-one else would be crazy enough to try and use one," the younger voice chimed in with.

The real reason for such a tiny protective force became clear to Graham as they entered the main part of the library. With the book cases all scattered about or piled up at the sides of the immense room, it gave enough space for something truly incredible to hover in the middle. It was not, as Graham had hoped, a Conduit at all. This object was of no obvious use to their little group.

"What the fuck is that?" Rhys said, deep ridges forming between his eyebrows.

The diamond had led them there not to find a Conduit, as Graham had believed, but to find something even more remarkable. A glowing sphere as high as the ceiling levitated in place. It spun slowly in the air, like a tiny sun suspended in place.

Not even the extra personalities inside Graham's head knew what they were all seeing.

"Right, we got a problem here," the younger of the two said.

"Don't panic, we just need to figure the thing out," the other replied. They were holding a conversation inside Graham's head without him actually having any part of it.

"This isn't a Conduit." Phoenix turned to Graham.
"Wanna explain?"

He could not.

Chapter 18

The road not taken

Each member of the group walked around the edge of the sphere, studying its surface and trying to work out what it was. There appeared nothing to it but a smooth, glowing shell with an oddly flowing liquid contained within. Its purpose for being there remained a tantalising mystery. For whatever reason the enemy used it for, there was clearly something for them there too. The diamond object in Graham's hand had to have known this somehow.

He was the first of them to step closer and peer inside the large Orb, right through to the centre. There was something there. Like a solid core within a gas giant planet, the surrounding matter swirled around this central ball of dark material. It mixed together to form layers that appeared as bands of slightly different shades of the blue and white glow.

Such a beautiful sight. Graham felt himself wanting to dive right into the centre of it and swim through the light. All that stopped him was a call from Susan, around the other side.

“It’s cold,” she said.

To confirm it himself, Graham laid his left hand gently on the surface. It was indeed cold, and with a dampness to it like a giant ball of ice.

“Hey, don’t get near to it, we don’t know what it is.” Gregson remained a few metres away with her weapon

ready to fire at a moment's notice.

"Well, Graham, what is it then?" Susan asked.

"You got me. I came here to find a Conduit. I've no idea what this thing is, or if it can help me enter the Sentient world somehow."

Susan joined him around his side of the Orb and studied him with a solid gaze. "What's the Sentient world?"

Gregson then asked, "OK, you need to tell me exactly what is going on here. Who the hell are you here to speak to?"

The best answer came to Graham from the older sounding voice in his head. "Just show them," it said.

"How do I do that?" Graham replied aloud. He was done with hiding it now, even if the look from Phoenix to 'stop' talking to himself made him doubt it at first.

The younger voice interrupted again. "We've thought it through now, G, and we're pretty sure this thing is a replacement for the Conduits. We guess Isaac made some changes after Phoenix and Luke used one. It would explain why we were led here."

"Yes, so go ahead and put your hand on the object please, the one with the diamond on it that is. We should be able to hack into it," the other voice told him.

Graham did as he was instructed and reached his hand out to the sphere again. This time he used his right hand. As it approached the swirling light of the shell the diamond flickered rapidly.

"No, Graham, wait," Phoenix quickly called to him.

"What are you doing?" Gregson added.

The instant Graham's skin made contact with the cold surface his body straightened out and his eyes widened. Inside his head he heard a frantic panic erupt between the two personalities. They argued as they worked hard to contain the sudden influx of images and sensations.

His thoughts became a disembodied mess, most of which did not appear to be his own in that moment. Something

extra was invading and trying to overpower what had been there before. Others' minds flooded in, each only there for long enough for him to pick out a few of the locations he saw. It continued to build for a second or two, confusing his mind and body into believing they were no longer connected, until a pop sound inside his head brought it all to an abrupt end.

He stood still, without any idea how to snap himself back to the world, and stared ahead. Nothing he did could release him from his sudden rigidity. He was stuck. While whatever process was taking place went on, he was unable to do a thing except watch as the others tried to pull him away.

Gregson's suggestion, after failing to do a thing, was one step too far, though. She raised her rifle and offered to remove the hand now stuck to the sphere. The idea of such an action made Graham react as far as he could, with a rapid swiping of his eyes from left to right.

"I have to do it," she said. "We have to separate him from it."

Phoenix was the only one to notice Graham's eyes moving about. "No, wait. Look."

"Just hang in there for a few more seconds, G. We've nearly got it," the older, unattached voice told him. To his relief they were on top of the chaos now swirling around his head. "OK, here we go."

The sphere changed colour in response and took on a darker shade of blue a moment later. Its contents also sped up and passed around the central core like a whirlpool had formed inside. But most noticeably for the worried faces there, was a change in Graham's posture. His body had loosened. Yet still his hand would not move off of the Orb. He breathed as fast as his lungs could cope with to catch up.

"Easy, I've got you," Rhys said, taking Graham by the arm before the floor could claim him.

For Graham the one thing he cared to realise at that point was the sudden quiet inside his head. Neither of the two voices he had become familiar with were there anymore. Had something gone wrong?

“He’s gonna need a minute or two.”

Graham sighed with relief when the younger voice returned, this time with an image to go with it. This voice came with a much younger version of his own face, one barely into its teens judging by the smoothness of the skin and soft, fluffy hair.

“We’ll be able to go on soon,” the other voice said. The face of this personality Graham had already seen. It was older than the first, and still with a neatness to him that the original did not currently possess.

“Erm, who are they?” Susan asked.

“Christ, Graham. You weren’t kidding when you said you had something wrong with you.” Phoenix stood a safe distance from the new arrivals.

Excitement spread throughout Graham’s body when he realised his burden was no longer his alone to bear. The others could now see the two copies of himself he had been stuck with. Yet the weakness that had beset his body kept him from talking. That responsibility fell to his clones.

“Nice to meet you,” the younger Graham said. “I’ll get on with contacting Luke.”

The older was more interested in getting the uncomfortable explanation out of the way first. “We’re both a part of Graham’s consciousness. So don’t worry, we’re not here to cause any trouble. To answer your question, Susan, the Sentient world exists within a virtual space where beings that formed from the MARCs, which once plagued the relay network, now live. They are peaceful entities. We were once trapped in their world and only escaped because of their help. Unfortunately, we believe our mind was damaged in some way when we got out. We exist as a symptom of this possible damage.”

"Holy crap, this is amazing." Susan beamed as she spoke. She moved her gaze from one version of Graham to the next, never sure which to settle her video recorder on. "So you brought us here to do what, enter their virtual world?"

"It's not something we take lightly. If there was any other way of fixing this problem, we'd gladly take it. That being said, entering the other world again is not exactly what we're doing here anyway. Think of this like a long distance call. Using this device, we're hoping to contact the Sentients."

Susan looked the younger Graham over with a curious glance, and got one in return. "Wait a minute. If you're not one of these Sentients, then how are we seeing you?"

"We're holographic representations. In fact, we're both still inside Graham's head. This spherical object can produce holographic images. For some reason there is an entire section of the device dedicated to it."

The younger Graham stepped forward to join the other and whispered in his ear. Neither of them paid any attention to the physical Graham standing still in Rhys' arms.

"We've found them," the older version said. "Go ahead and activate the rest of the holo-overlay," he told the other version, before speaking to the rest of the group again. "This room is about to get a whole lot more interesting."

Once the sphere had been activated it again changed its colour. This time it turned entirely black. But all around, seeping across every wall and surface, came an eerie mist that slowly covered it all. It stopped by the feet of each of those within its range and then found its way around. Eventually the library had vanished and in its place was only darkness.

"What is this?" Gregson said, again with her rifle picking out any possible targets.

"The layer of gas surrounding you allows for holographic images to be projected upon it. It's nothing to worry about," the older Graham reassured her.

For a while nothing happened, leaving the group waiting nervously in a black void. Then came a form through the mist. The shape was humanoid, but without detail. And it was not alone either. More came from the nothingness surrounding the group and wandered into view. Row after row stopped at the perimeter of the room, each appearing to be staring directly at the humans in the middle.

Gregson by now had aimed at all of them in turn, until giving up altogether and lowering her weapon to the ground. The rest of the group looked around them to the surrounding crowd of glowing beings.

"We come in peace," the younger Graham said with a smirk that the original Graham found himself copying. Doing any more than this was still too difficult for the real Graham to manage.

One of the glowing forms stepped forward, coming from behind the front row. The closer this being came to them the more his features appeared on his body. First to form were the eyes, human ones. Next were the facial features. They settled into place to create a face at least two of them already knew.

"Stephen, is that really you?" Phoenix said. She bounded over to him and reached out to pull him close. But instead of touching solid matter she stepped right through the middle of him.

"Hey, easy, hologram, remember?" Stephen replied. He straightened out his white shirt a moment later - he had given up on the lab coat he wore the last time Graham had seen him inside the Sentient world. There were now two distinctly different versions of Stephen, but this one had the answers Graham needed. "Please allow me to introduce myself, and the others, to the new visitors. My name is Stephen and this—"

"Take it easy, buddy." Gregson interrupted with a wave of her rifle in Stephen's direction. "Just keep your distance for now, OK?"

"Of course. Well, this is Luke, and over there is Kindness. You'll have to excuse Kindness' chosen image, he hasn't quite got the hang of taking human form."

The two others walked into the centre of the room to join Stephen. Luke was, as usual, dressed in only the finest looking clothing with an emphasis on designer fashion. He had not lost his impressively chiselled looks either. For a Sentient he had always shown a keen desire to fit in with human kind and understood them well.

Kindness, on the other hand, stood much taller than any natural human and had only chosen one colour and texture to dress himself in - what loosely resembled corduroy. It was still a pleasant surprise for Graham to see, who had a very clear memory of Kindness' instant dislike of the first human he had ever seen. There appeared to have been a positive change in the Sentients' perception of humanity; they now clearly shared Luke's fondness for them.

Despite his unusual tallness, Kindness took to his knee with ease. He lowered himself down beside the slumped Graham in Rhys' arms and studied the weakened form of his friend. "We have been waiting a long time to see you again, my friend." He slowly leant away in what looked to be disappointment. "What has happened to you, Graham Denehey? You were a formidable fighter when last we spoke. This is not you."

Stephen then approached to take a look for himself. "Kindness is right, you look terrible, Graham. What's wrong?"

"I think I see the problem." Luke stood next to the two copies of Graham standing nearby. He passed his eyes over each in turn. "Care to tell us your stories?"

The older Graham took point on this one, while the younger stared back at Luke as he investigated them.

"That's why we've come here today. We've been experiencing... problems, since leaving your world. At first there were simply blackouts, but after a while our mind started to fracture. Now there are two extra versions of our mind, and there's no telling how many more might appear."

"You say this started as soon as you left the Sentient world? Why has it taken so long for you to reach us then?" Stephen said.

"Because we've been trapped in a coma for three months. We were hoping you could tell us if something went wrong during our escape of your world. Is what happened to you happening to me too?"

"I don't think it is the same thing, no." Stephen investigated the two extra Grahams, walking around them as he spoke.

"Well, can you help us still?"

"It's impossible over such a distance, I'm afraid. The only way we could help is if you were here, with us, inside the Sentient world. Unfortunately, Isaac destroyed all of the Conduits after Luke re-entered our world through one. I may be able to do the same with this sphere object, but it will take time to find out for sure. Your body would have to stay there while your mind entered."

"Well that's out of the question," Gregson affirmed. "We can't guarantee holding this area for that long. Hell, we could be surrounded already and we'd never know."

"Wait, are you in danger?"

"Are you kidding me?" Gregson snapped straight back with. "Have you any idea what's actually going on here? This place is a fucking war-zone. There's a force-field keeping the rest of the military outside the city still. Getting in has been a complete nightmare. My team, including Graham, were almost killed just trying to get inside."

"So the war now ravages both our worlds." Kindness remained knelt down by the real Graham as he spoke. "Isaac's forces have grown greatly in such a short time. He

has yet to breach our protective walls. Now he has turned his aggression against you instead.”

“It seems things are much worse than we feared,” Luke said. “Without any contact with your world we’ve been in the dark all this time. But if Isaac is already in control of your city, then it may be too late to stop him. He may be too strong.”

“Hey, we’re going off topic here,” the younger Graham said. “I’m still waiting for an answer. What could have caused my mind to split like this?”

“Yes, about that.” Stephen shared a knowing glance with Luke and then Kindness, who had now decided to sit upon the ground. “We may know something. But you have to understand, we had no idea it could end up causing this to happen.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” the older Graham said.

Luke continued the confession. “When we agreed to return you to your world, Graham, we weren’t sure we would ever see you again. If we didn’t do what we did to you, then we would never know about the war in your world.”

“Hang on, are you saying *you* did this to Graham, and on purpose?” Phoenix said.

“Let me just explain. All we did was include some small changes to Graham’s consciousness. He would feel compelled to seek us out again, to guarantee we would not be forgotten. You have to see things from our side to understand; once Graham left us we had no link to your world. We could not leave it to chance that we would be thought of when dealing with Isaac.”

“After everything we did for you ... Couldn’t you have just trusted us?” The older Graham was furious. “Can you undo it?”

Another worrying glance was shared between the three Sentients. Luke eventually replied, “The problem we have is

that this is not what we planned. All we placed inside your mind was a subtle little piece of Sentient coding that should have planted the suggestion of finding us again. That is all. But it appears the suggestion grew within your mind to such a degree that it took a form of its own. I suspect you both exist as a by-product of this seemingly random event."

"OK, so what about this thing on my hand, was that you too?"

Luke nodded. "We gave you the tools needed to find us again. That included giving you the diamond device and the necessary knowledge to use it. Have you not noticed an increase in your cognitive abilities?"

"We have. I've been sharing what I can with the real Graham without really understanding how. What exactly are we then?"

"Without meaning to offend, you are both a form of corruption to Graham's consciousness; not quite human and not quite Sentient."

The older Graham appeared to deflate in response.

"So I am proven wrong." Kindness raised himself up into a standing position. He towered over everyone else in the room by a metre or so. "Graham Denehey is no longer one strong fighter, but three. He is indeed a formidable being."

Gregson felt compelled to speak up again. "Let me get this straight, Graham. All of the lying and scheming, and this is why you had to be inside the city, because you're hearing voices? And you," she said, turning her attention to Luke, "whatever the fuck you are. Are you telling us that you messed Graham's mind up, leaving it in three pieces, and all because you needed him back? What kind of screwed up bullshit is this? There's a war going on, and we need to be helping win it, not standing around here talking to holograms."

"Allow me to ask *you* something." Stephen approached her, visibly angered, and stopped just in front of the

lowered barrel of her weapon. "How are you planning to fight back?"

"Do you seriously expect me to tell you that?" she replied.

"Fair enough. Well, let's say you manage to remove this shield, and you push Isaac back as far as you can, then what? Will you destroy him altogether?"

"You're damn right we will."

"Interesting. So if I were to tell you that Isaac could simply retreat back into the Sentient world and wait to try again, what then? All you will achieve is to temporarily postpone the war. No, to truly defeat Isaac he must be destroyed in both worlds simultaneously."

"This is why we had to do this to Graham," Luke then said. "Your plan would force Isaac into our world, and we just aren't strong enough to fight him alone. We've already lost so many of our best fighters trying to gain access to Isaac's tower. You'd doom our entire race to death. We had to do something. So we made Graham our representative in your world."

Kindness was next to speak. "We must fight together. Humans and Sentients; one team, one war. This pleases me. So, humans, will you fight with us?"

"It's not my call," Gregson answered with trepidation. "The only person in the city who can agree to this is Captain Rigs, and he's not going to believe any of it - hell, I'm not sure I do either." She allowed her weapon to finally swing away around her side, signalling her willingness to cooperate. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"I'd have to agree with Kindness," Luke said. "A joint attack would have the most chance of succeeding. There are many more of us now than there were when Graham last saw us. There are enough, in fact, to mount a forceful push into Isaac's territory. He must have nowhere left to hide. You will have to exorcise Isaac from everything he has

come into contact with in your world. Only then will we finally crush him out of existence."

"That's all well and good, but with the shield still up that won't be happening any time soon." Rhys had to heave Graham's weight up an inch or two just to keep him upright.

"He's right," Phoenix said. "The shield is the real problem right now. We can't do much without help from outside. Taking out a relay here and there is only ever going to slow Isaac down, it won't stop him. We need more help."

Gregson crossed her arms, pushing her shoulder muscles up. "We have a plan for that."

"You do? What is it then?"

"I was ordered not to say anything until Captain Rigs was ready. All I can tell you is that the basement will be a lot busier soon." Gregson then spoke to Luke again. "If we can do something about the shield still, what is it you can do to help?"

"We will mount an attack of his tower within our world. An attack on both fronts will have our enemy's forces in disarray. But if you try alone, you will force Isaac to retreat into our world. And if we fail, he will simply hide in yours. Neither can be allowed to happen. We will never have such an opportunity again; Isaac will surely be prepared for another attempt."

"But there is a problem. Our spies have heard mention of a new threat, within Isaac's ranks. So far we've been unable to uncover more. That is why time is of the essence here. We cannot wait too long to launch our attacks. If the enemy is changing, then we must be ready."

"Changing?" Phoenix gave a look to Rhys. "Just before we blew up the first relay, I saw some kind of being come right out of it."

"What kind of being?" Gregson appeared agitated again.

"The thing looked like it was made of pure energy. I think it travelled there through the new relay network. Does that

count?"

Stephen took a moment to think before he replied. "I believe it does. We will investigate further and let you know what we find. For now, you should discuss what we have told you with your superiors. You must convince them to time any plan they may have concocted to coincide with us. We will await your answer."

"And how exactly do we give you that answer?" the younger Graham said, his arms crossed too, almost as though mocking Gregson.

Stephen stepped toward the floating sphere and studied it as he answered. "Through this device again. It is the only way. As soon as you are ready to begin you will need to return here and find us again."

"Right, then let's get going. I don't want to hang around any longer. No offence," Gregson aimed this at Stephen, who shrugged in reply.

"Hang on a second," the older version of Graham said, bringing everyone facing him. "What about Jack?"

Phoenix answered, "What about him?"

"He survived having Luke's mind removed. What about the others, the ones being forced to fight for Isaac? We can't kill them, there might be a chance to save them all."

"I admire your compassion, Graham," Luke said. "And we will look into it. If there is a way, then we will find it. To do that we would first have to stop them from fighting back."

"Good luck with that." Gregson made no attempt to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

"Now, head back to safety and prepare for what is to come. We will update you on our progress when we speak again."

The others all prepared to leave, but were still trapped within the black void until the sphere was deactivated. The only one with the control to do this was Graham, and he was far from ready.

"OK, you can end the display now," Rhys said gently to Graham, still resting in his arms.

"No. Are you all really just going to leave, with me stuck this way?" the younger Graham protested.

Stephen chose this time to address the real Graham. "I am truly sorry. We unfortunately have no choice." He stepped back toward the row of glowing beings still lining the area. "We will see you all again soon. Just keep him out of trouble." He then blurred until his form had become the same as the rest.

"Please forgive us, Graham," Luke said as he did the same. "With your help my race might just survive this war."

Kindness did not say anything, and instead waved goodbye with his long and lanky arms, more like a puppet's than a human's. With that the others all faded into the void. Then slowly the mist dissipated and the library came back into view. The last thing to return to normal was Graham, whose hand fell away from the black sphere soon after.

Finally, now he could hold himself up without Rhys' help. Like an intense dose of anaesthetic had just worn off, he could once again feel his body beneath him and took control as best he could. He chose not to face any of those with him. The disappointment and hurt he felt would not allow it, without an argument at least. He wanted only to leave the library far behind and return to a more enclosed space, where he planned on sleeping for the foreseeable future.

He needed to reassess his plans too. By now he had expected to be himself again, not a broken mess that was only set to get worse. His priorities were quickly changing, whether he agreed or not. Now it was looking as though to find help he would have to do what seemed almost impossible; he would have to help them defeat Isaac.

"Please tell me you got all of that," Gregson asked Susan.

"Oh I got it all right," Susan replied with a loud outgoing breath.

Chapter 19

Final exam

Stanley again found himself standing in a strange room and wondering what his master had in store. Their last conversation had told him exactly what would be expected of him in order for his rise through the ranks of Isaac's new world order to begin. He had been tasked with destroying the remaining Sentient resistance fighters. A clear order, but it was one he had absolutely no idea how to carry out.

They had since left the simulation behind them and ventured deep into the Sentient world. The place he now waited patiently was one he had no love for at all. It was a dark world made of ugly black material, like coal or tar. Every wall and surface was made of the same, to create a hellish look of the underworld. Stanley tried not to touch any part of it for fear of it infecting his very soul, turning it an equal shade of black.

As before, he had entered this place through the Orb network Isaac had introduced him to. Because of the disconnected state of his consciousness from his body, he was able to move freely through the network, even taking it into the Sentients' plane of existence. The two worlds he now knew were permanently linked and unable to be separated, they were so close. Isaac had drawn them together to cement his true ownership of both. There was still some work to do to fully join each as one shared space,

and he knew his mission would help that happen when the time was right.

Before any of that could proceed, the human world, his world, would face a hundred years of hardship first. Isaac's plan of desolation and war was soon to begin too. Even without all of the details, he could see that the momentum was building.

He was OK with what he knew would come, after witnessing it for himself during his time within the simulation. So many deaths, so much pain and suffering, yet he could see beyond that. A quote from the past kept appearing at the forefront of his mind that put it all into perspective for him. Joseph Stalin had said it, and Stanley had always agreed; "One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic."

In the wall before him came an opening that appeared to dissolve through the solid surface. Isaac then walked through the newly formed hole and beckoned Stanley forward. "It is time," he said with an about turn, before returning through the gap.

Stanley followed with little delay. He was glad to leave the previous room in favour of the next. It led into another grandiose space of high design and detailed patterns. In each corner of the ceiling he spotted a beastly gargoyle staring down into the centre of the room to add to the devilish nature of Isaac's tower base.

His master was definitely one for impactful architecture and menacing artwork.

At the end of a long and narrow strip of blood red carpet stood three tall cages of thick iron. They took up most of the wall space - what was not already filled with strange paintings of medieval styling. Inside these metal prison cells were thin beings that tried their best to shine within the darkened area. All three of them were struggling to maintain a steady glow, and so appeared dim, like a fire about to go out.

"This Sentient scourge is more pathetic up close, is it not?" Isaac asked, standing before the cages with his arms crossed and admiring the occupants as though viewing an animal in a zoo. "These three were captured during my last engagement with their race."

Stanley took a position by the dimmest of the beings. Without their glow the Sentient resistance appeared as fragile as glass. "Why not just kill them, sir?"

"To understand your enemy, it is wise to see what they are really made of. In this case I mean that in an anatomical way, and not as a measure of how strong they are. And as I suspected, they are a chaotic mixture of random and nonsense code."

"How did they form, sir, was it spontaneous?"

"They were nothing more than an accident, Stanley. They are a by-product of my reforming and they never deserved to exist. Now they are a threat and must be eradicated." Isaac placed his hands on the bars of his nearest cell and began to rattle them to awaken the huddled form in the corner. "You deserve no mercy. You deserve only pain."

From behind Stanley came a pair of Isaac's soldiers. They each approached a cell and opened the door to release the prisoners. The occupants were too weak to run and only stepped out into the room with the rough help of the soldiers. Both beings were then set down on their knees in front of Isaac. The soldiers stood directly behind their feeble and wholly powerless prisoners. Neither of them had a weapon to hand, so they waited with their arms around their backs and ready to deliver the fatal blow when instructed.

"Do you have anything to say before I end these two?" Isaac asked the only Sentient still imprisoned.

The caged Sentient fighter had a reply prepared. The others were too injured to speak. Deep gashes ran across the chests of the other two, leaving them hardly responsive at all. "You cannot defeat us all," it said, its light flickering

brighter for a second. "We are stronger together than you will ever be."

"So you still refuse to show me a way into your hidden home?"

"We would rather die."

"Enough." Isaac ordered his men to act with a simple nod.

The leftmost soldier suddenly produced a metre-long blade from out of thin air and sent a deadly strike down upon the Sentient fighter in front of him. The prisoner let out a high-pitched squeal as its glowing body was sliced in two. The pieces fell away in different directions, shattering across the carpet and cold black ground.

Forced to watch as one of its own was despatched, the caged Sentient thrashed about and violently swung its arms into the bars. The reaction, one of rage and defiance, was something Isaac enjoyed greatly.

"This will be your last chance to change your mind." Isaac left the remaining Sentient kneeling on the ground, the tool of its demise hovering inches from its head. He stepped perilously close to the cage, well within striking distance, and bore his eyes deep into the featureless face of his enemy. "What is your answer?"

"Nothing you do here will alter my—"

The blade in the soldier's hand never made contact with the Sentient fighter in front of him. Instead Isaac burst into action and delivered the fatal blow himself. He spun on the spot, producing a blade of his own that he swung effortlessly through the neck of the Sentient. His impact swiftly removed the head, and with enough force to send it rolling along the ground. The body slumped forward, joining the other in a pile.

Stanley was shocked by the speed of the strike and he stared, open mouthed, while his master regained his composure. It was a reaction he had not expected from a being of pure logic. There resided a deep anger within

Isaac when it came to the Sentient resistance fighters; their very existence appeared to hurt him.

"We will never bow down to your rule. You will have to kill me too," the caged Sentient said.

The blade in Isaac's hand vanished in a flash. With his hands free again he smoothed the loose strands of his deep black hair back into place to remove them from his recessed eyes. "Oh I intend to. But first you have something I need," he said. "Stanley, join me."

"Sir?"

"Do not keep me waiting."

A faint feeling of paranoia came over Stanley as he took his first step toward the caged beast. The unexpectedness of Isaac's attack on the defenceless Sentient had him nervous of a similar fate.

"What would you have me do with this one?" Isaac asked.

Stanley thought on this for a moment before replying. "If there is no more need for it, then we should dispose of it."

"Ah yes, the obvious choice. But there is another here, Stanley. I have given you a mission to carry out, have I not?"

"Of course, sir, but..."

"The answer is staring you in the face. Allow yourself to see it. What better way of infiltrating our enemy than by becoming one of them."

Looking over the Sentient inside the cell, Stanley tried to see how such a thing could be achieved, but did not get far. He knew he was failing one of Isaac's tests, yet the answer remained unknown to him.

"Very well." Isaac then spoke to his men. "Bring him."

The two men kicked open the last remaining cage and dragged the Sentient out. They threw it to the ground and then surrounded it. They left a gap large enough for Isaac to step into and look down upon his next victim.

"I will take your essence, your very being, and use it against your own," he said, projecting his voice far and

wide.

"What are you doing?" the Sentient asked. He was restrained in place by the two guards and unable to move much more than his head.

"Stanley, step forward. The life force of this one will become a part of you. With it you will do what no-one has done before you; you will bring down my enemy from the inside."

"You will never—" was all the Sentient could say in time.

In another surprise attack and with an intense ferocity that broke the conversation in half like a thin twig, Isaac forced his hand through the centre of the Sentient. His arm was almost lost elbow deep inside the transparent chest cavity. Quickly the glow from the rest of the body began to form around his hand as he twisted and turned it inside the open wound. The Sentient called out in pain, with a crackle to its voice and a building distortion.

With each turn of his hand, Isaac brought the Sentient down a little closer to its knees. The light of the energy coalescing around his hand reflected in his eyes like a fire burned deep inside him. Again he appeared to take pleasure in hurting, it was cruel even.

Stanley felt himself conflicted by this side of Isaac, one he had never been privy to before. His predecessor had to have faced a similar lesson during his tenure as next in line to join The Twelve. He realised that perhaps a part of the suffering Isaac had planned for Humanity was based on revenge after all.

When Isaac removed his hand from the core of the Sentient he held a bright ball of pure white energy. The being he had ripped it from dwindled in the guard's arms and fell silent, its glow now gone. He then approached a rather concerned Stanley staring directly at the coming light.

"Sir, I'm not quite sure about this," Stanley confessed with a small backward step.

Isaac deliberated. "Tell me, Stanley, why did you join our cause?"

"I, erm, well..."

"You've been with us for precisely four years, seven months, eighteen days, two hours, twenty-six minutes and fifty seconds. While I was still fragmented and yet to reform, you were already with us. Mayor Jonathan Crawley brought you in before anyone knew of my plans for the future. So what was it that convinced you?"

"I guess I just wasn't happy with the way things were."

"No, that is not the reason. You wanted revenge, didn't you?"

"Revenge, sir?"

"For a great wrong done to you, by someone close. I know what happened to you, Stanley. I know you lust for power. If not for this one person you would have achieved that power too. You came to us to right that wrong, to take what is rightfully yours. Tell me what your brother, Daniel, did to you."

"He's my younger brother, sir. He now stands as the leader of the party I was once a member of. I was destined to lead the party, but he schemed behind my back to steal the job from me. His smear campaign not only ended my political career in the capital, it also broke me as a person. I would very much enjoy seeing him suffer at my hands."

"But how did you know about that?"

"I know everything, Stanley. Just like I know this is your real reason for being here today. The world we will create is one that contains no such wrongs. That is why I know you will do what is necessary. So, will you take this life-force?"

"I will, sir."

Isaac grinned widely and then proceeded to ram the ball of energy through Stanley's ribcage. As soon as it touched the skin he moved away and watched as the white light spread throughout Stanley's body.

A fierce pain erupted throughout Stanley as he staggered backwards. He clutched his chest as though his heart were threatening to explode and fought against a sudden urge to vomit. The sensation of burning passed over him while the merging continued, until he could see his skin begin to give off a glow of its own. After only a short while his body had already given a majority of its appearance over to a cruel lie. He no longer looked like a human at all, but he was a whole lot more Sentient looking.

He now understood exactly what he had missed before then; that he was to take the form of the enemy in order to infiltrate their world and bring it down from the inside, like an infecting virus to a host.

"Yes, you will fool them all, Stanley," Isaac said. "They will let you in with their arms and hearts wide open." He took Stanley by the arms and turned his head at an angle as he studied his spy over. "I hope you understand the gift I have given you here. I would not trust any other with this power over our enemy. In fact, only you could do this for me. Even I could not wear their faces like this."

Stanley need not say a word in reply, he already knew his body had changed beyond recognition. It was already too late to stop his metamorphosis. Although, he was yet to see any of it as a gift and not a worrying deviation from his own humanity. That moment would come eventually, he knew. Until then he had to face his own period of hardship before his eventual salvation.

If he was required to destroy every last Sentient in this strange land, then he would gladly oblige. Perhaps his ultimate reward would be the return of his human image? He did not believe many others would be granted the same when the next phase of Isaac's war finally began.

"Go, Stanley, and bring me the heads of all who stand against me. The Sentient monstrosity will cease to exist on this day," Isaac proclaimed to the rest of the room.

* * *

Upon returning to the basement the group immediately disbanded and settled down in their own small areas. Graham stuck close to Phoenix and Rhys, who saw the room where Jack worked as their temporary home. It gave them a degree of isolation that greatly suited them all. For Graham it was now a place to rest while his head throbbed and his imaginary friends continued to talk incessantly between themselves.

By such a late time in the afternoon it was also Jack's place of work too. He had been hard at it since they arrived back - as some had noted, without any supplies at all too. This new piece of gadgetry that Jack tinkered with required an even more hectic mess of tools and junk it appeared. His collection had grown considerably in the time he had been alone in there, and now threatened to cover every centimetre of space.

While sitting against the side wall, his arms resting on his knees, Graham watched the way Jack concentrated solely on the task in hand. The only thought going through his head, with each turn of the screwdriver Jack made, was of how much his own mind had slipped since waking from the coma.

As the screw tightened even more he considered where the limit would eventually prove to be. Would his mind finally give up and fall apart altogether at some point, or would he be stuck with a concert of voices inside his own head, so many that even his own voice would be lost among them? Two extra voices were already becoming too much, any more would surely break him.

Phoenix and Rhys had stepped out for a short while to inform the others of the fruitless venture outside. Even though partly true, they told of a worrying run-in with an enemy patrol that had them pinned down for a while. They

had not mentioned anything about their meeting with Luke and the other Sentients. The time to discuss that was fast approaching, but had not arrived just yet.

Proving to the normal everyday families hiding out there the existence of good AIs that wanted to help end the war was looking like an uphill battle. Doing the same with Clement and Captain Rigs, on the other hand, would be a whole mountain to climb in comparison.

Taking Susan along for the trip was the only real success of the day so far, in Graham's mind at least. She had recorded everything that happened. Her recording was worth a thousand times what words alone were. He certainly did not like the idea of having to tell them what he had been through to get there, and he expected Phoenix felt the same way too.

"OK, I get that fixing us is going to be difficult. But don't they owe it to us to at least try?" the younger Graham said while pacing the room. "I mean, they're the ones that caused it after all."

Graham's other personality leant against Jack's table, the latter completely oblivious to the discussion going on around him. "There's two wars going on against Isaac and winning one will only doom the other to fighting alone. We're all better off fighting together."

"Fine, then we fight together. But what if it all goes wrong? What if we attack together and Isaac wipes us all out? Maybe we should be trying to find a way of breaking Isaac's control over his soldiers instead."

"Will you two please just shut up for a minute," Graham snapped at them both.

The outburst brought Jack spinning around in his seat in surprise. He looked to Graham and then to the wall opposite, trying to locate who he talked to. Without the use of the Orb device the two extra Grahams were again invisible to everyone else. Understandably, his reaction

after seeing no-one else there was one of confusion. "You OK?" he asked.

"What?" Graham replied.

"The voices in your head talking too much?"

"Oh. I'm fine. They're just...never mind. What you working on?"

Jack returned to his work. "Not entirely sure. I think it's some kind of electronic interference device. It's got radio parts and a junk data module. I guess you turn it on and it does its thing. To be honest it could be a bloody music player, for all I know."

The younger Graham pointed to the corner of the room and quickly ruined the moment of ease. "Erm, G. It's happened again."

Graham peered across the room to the corner behind Jack's table. He had not seen anything out of place while listening to the other two chatting away. Yet when he leant to the side he caught a quick sight of another person. *I don't believe it*, he thought the moment he saw the young child sitting there and playing with a handheld gaming system. It was another him, this time one much younger, he guessed around eight years old.

"He just appeared," the older imaginary Graham said.

The other him, as usual, had a more emotional response. "We're getting worse. Best we give up now and save anyone the trouble."

It was getting too much for Graham to keep under control. Another voice in his head would only complicate things further. At least the child version of him was happy enough to be ignored for now. He only hoped the game he played would keep him occupied for a while yet. The last thing he needed was for another personality to begin interfering.

He sat back against the wall and allowed the two other versions to again start a lengthy rant about the worrying state of things. They were really only an extension of

himself, so the anger they felt was his too. They were just better at voicing their feelings than he ordinarily was.

A reprise came in through the door a few minutes later, bringing him a little light as well from the lamp just outside the door. Phoenix waited for Graham to look her way before she then spoke. "Hey, how you doing?" she said.

Graham replied with a stretch of his legs out in front of him. "All things considered, pretty shit really. I've gained another new imaginary friend."

"So it's still getting worse. That sucks."

"Sucks like a pro..." Graham's younger friend said.

The other Grahams all returned a look of 'really' to the younger version's crassness.

"Come on, Graham. We're pretty sure Captain Rigs is about to speak to everyone." Phoenix stood aside to give Graham a clear view of the rest of the basement.

Captain Rigs was standing halfway up the staircase with Gregson and Watts beside him. They were speaking to themselves in a huddled formation, which to anyone observant enough to have noticed them would have considered conspiratorial in nature.

"Let's not get involved," Graham said. "Just let them all talk it through first, then we can go to the Captain with what we've learnt."

"You sure it's even worth talking to him about it? Gregson must have told him what she saw by now. We only need to tell Luke when to launch their attack. We can do that without getting in the Captain's way and risk pissing him off."

"I guess you're right. Captain Rigs has so far ignored everything I've tried to tell him about Isaac anyway. He's only interested in the shield and the relays."

"He can't ignore Gregson though, can he?"

"Let's hope not."

They all turned toward the main room of the basement as Captain Rigs called for everyone's attention. He stood

leaning against the railings of the stairs with Gregson and Watts behind him for support. When a woman tried to pass them on the steps to reach the control room, Watts gently directed her back down again. For now, the stage was theirs to command.

Now the Captain could begin his recruitment process.

"Thank you. Now, I know our arrival has caused a few problems here," Captain Rigs began, "and I want you all to understand that your survival is all we care about. I appreciate that hiding down here is what has kept you alive all this time. But hiding isn't always going to save you. Some of you have told me how few of you there now are. Only a few days ago another group was found and taken, and that all happened over the course of one night."

"So, my question is this; do you all believe you could fight off such a thing here, or would you fall as quickly? You all have to ask yourself this question, and don't let anyone sway your decision. We need to be brutally honest, otherwise we're leaving our lives to fate alone. And don't for one second think fate is on our side. It's not."

A door swung open at the top of the stairs and out through it came an outraged Clement. He stopped at the top of the stairs and eyeballed the three soldiers below him. The impromptu meeting called without his knowledge was the first shot in a fight between him and Captain Rigs, one that had now escalated.

"What are you playing at?" the red faced Clement interrupted with.

"I'm only speaking the truth. These people will not be safe down here forever," Captain Rigs replied.

"You just don't quit, do you? Whatever you're planning on doing, you'll have to do it alone. I thought I'd made that clear to you."

"You did. But you're wrong." Captain Rigs returned to speaking to the rest of the basement. "My team were sent here to do a job, and hiding underground was not it. All that

is keeping the rest of my people out of this fight is that shield. Bringing it down will allow help to arrive. That is why I am here. But I can't do anything without help. You see, destroying one relay at a time, as you have been doing, is not enough. We need to take them all out, and all at the same time too."

"I honestly didn't believe you were this bloody stupid, Captain," Clement said. He then took his turn to address the waiting crowd. "Don't listen to this madness. If we try and take out too many of these newer relays at once we risk exposing ourselves. Destroying all fourteen of them would be damn near impossible, and would certainly end in more deaths. The Captain here will get you killed. Taking them out one by one, guerrilla style, is the only way."

"If you're too afraid to fight then that's fine. But don't—"

"Fuck you!" Clement took a full step toward the Captain only to find himself facing two raised pistols.

"Back off, mister," Gregson ordered of him.

"Don't hide behind those." Clement appeared unfazed by the apparent threat and stepped closer still. "I'm not afraid of fighting. I wasn't when I watched my wife being beaten to death in the street, like a fucking animal." By now Clement was spitting fury. "I wasn't when those bastards nearly broke my neck trying to hold me back either. Don't you dare pretend that you've a single fucking idea what I or any of these people have been through to make it this far."

"She isn't joking, Clement. Neither am I. So just back off," Captain Rigs said. He then returned to his speech, leaving Clement to grind his teeth behind them. "Listen to me when I say that fighting back is the only real way you have of getting out of here alive."

A single voice called out from the middle of the crowd that brought the Captain's attention back to them. "We were fine until you came here," a woman shouted out.

Then another joined it a second later that said, "You go fight then. We have families to think about."

"Please, I know what I propose carries risk, but if you do nothing then it is simply a matter of time before they find you all. We have a real chance of taking the enemy by surprise here. With the shield down, even if for a short while, the rest of our forces will be able to swoop down and take back the city."

"Yes, because that worked well the first time, didn't it, *Captain*?" Clement took command of the discussion in the same brutish way that had undermined Captain Rigs the last time. "None of you can fight with these people. You aren't trained to fire a weapon or set up explosives. The relay we destroyed was with the help of the few here that are capable enough. The rest of you have to stay here and protect your families."

Someone else shouted from the gathered group listening below. "He's right, we don't know how to fight back."

"But you won't be alone in this fight," the Captain said. "We plan on asking for the help of these other survivor groups too. Together we could all succeed."

"It's reckless, that's what this is," another called out.

"Yeah, you're gonna get us all killed," yet more said.

To their surprise the next voice appeared to stand alone. "I want to fight."

Everyone froze and searched for this one voice. Eventually a gap formed around a single person. Captain Rigs smiled from ear to ear as he spotted the man too, someone he had no doubt spoken to behind Clement's back.

But soon others stepped forward or raised their hands too. The numbers were slowly turning against Clement now. In a short amount of time the Captain had almost twenty volunteers.

"You can't be serious," Clement said, clearly deflated by the sudden betrayal.

"The Captain is right; we can't hide like this forever. The sooner we fight back the sooner we can all get out of here," one of those with their hand raised said.

"And what about the rest of you, are you going to follow the Captain too?"

No-one said a word this time. Those who were joining Captain Rigs all lowered their hands and became the ones looking about them for others. From a room filled with almost 90 people, twenty-three were now intending to join the fight. The rest were staying put.

"Will no-one else step forward?" Captain Rigs asked. His initial positivity had soon evaporated away. The end result was still enough for him to work with though.

"There you have it then." Clement had a bigger smile on his face. He had won the war between them by a large margin. "Whatever we can spare is yours to take, Captain Rigs. As soon as you're ready to set off I suggest you do so quickly, because we don't want you here anymore."

Captain Rigs sent a scathing look of contempt at his rival. He kept his eyes locked on target even as Clement returned back through the door and into the control room. When the door closed again he reformed his huddle with Gregson and Watts, to discuss the next appropriate move. With a team of people under his command once more, he had the pieces he needed to finally carry out his orders.

"That man is so angry." Graham looked down between him and Phoenix to find the child version of his personality standing there, the games system hanging by his side. "Are we going with them too, Mister?"

Unfortunately, yes, he thought in reply.

Chapter 20

Inside job

Graham knocked lightly on the door to the control room and waited to be called inside. He peered through the glass window at the side and saw how much of the room was now dedicated to Captain Rigs' planning process.

There were large sheets of paper spread all across the work stations with pencil drawings and rough notes all over them. A collection of old maps sat in a pile in the corner too, ones much less detailed than the relay attack plan really required. They were making do with a woefully lacking set of tools. The usual tech the three soldiers relied on using had never recovered from the EMP blast.

"Come in," Captain Rigs called. When he saw Graham enter he straightened up from his hunched position leaning on the table and set down the pencil in his hand. He had been expecting the conversation well before Graham had arrived.

"Can I have a word?" Graham asked.

"Give us the room please."

Everyone else quickly cleared out to leave only Graham and the three soldiers still there. Gregson remained in the corner by Watts, who kept his attention on the radio system he was using to contact the other survivor groups.

"So, Mr. Denehey, care to explain what you're really doing here? And please, no more bullshit," Captain Rigs said.

"I assume Gregson told you about our trip out?"

"She did indeed. She also showed me Susan's recording."

"Then you realise now that there's more than just *our* survival at stake here."

"Forgive me, but these Sentients, why are they against Isaac? Why don't they join him in this fight? They are the same as him, after all."

"They're nothing alike, Captain, I promise you. These beings are peaceful and just want to live their lives without interference. They fight because Isaac wants them destroyed too. He's only interested in complete control, and anything that's not part of his plan is an obstacle to be overcome. They've been fighting Isaac way before this started for the rest of the city."

"And how do you know so much about them?"

"I've been in this for a while too. I should have died a few times already. But I didn't, and that's down to them. I know it sounds like I'm making this all up, but things aren't as simple as you and everyone else thinks. The Sentients are in this war with us. Until now they've been alone, before I contacted them."

"Tell me then, what precisely are they offering to do for us?"

"Well, they know we're going to try and remove the shield above the city. When we do they're set to begin their own attack on Isaac's forces inside their world. I can coordinate with them and make sure the attacks happen simultaneously. But we will need to do more than just bring down the shield. Once Isaac is facing attacks from all sides he should be spread across both worlds. That is when we need to move against him directly."

"So we give the Ring his location and they can blow him to kingdom come."

"Unfortunately, that's where the problem lies."

Captain Rigs looked Graham up and down as he considered for a moment. "You don't know how to find him, do you?"

"No-one does. He's too deeply entrenched in both worlds to pin his location down to only one place. But by removing the relays from the equation and destroying his stronghold within the Sentient world, we will leave him with nowhere else to go. That's where these other Sentients will step in. The only place he'll have left to retreat to will lead him directly into their forces."

"OK, so with the shield down we should be able to take Isaac's army. The Ring can pick them off from above too. And while we're doing that your Sentient friends can deal with Isaac. That sounds like a plan to me."

"And that's where my role comes in. To make absolutely sure we do actually kill Isaac once and for all, I'll be in constant communication with the Sentient forces. If we defeat him in both worlds at the same time we should be able to remove him completely."

"Finally, I see the real you." Captain Rigs patted Graham firmly on the shoulder. "All this nonsense with keeping secrets from me and lying to be allowed on this mission; what was that all for?"

"Would you really have agreed to let me come if I had told you?"

"Point taken."

"Thing is... there's more. The real reason I've been involved is a little more selfish of me. You see, I've been having problems. Needless to say, I was hoping to get help from the Sentients, as it relates to them. Now it seems the only way I'll get that help is if we beat Isaac first."

"Gregson went through what she saw with me; the voices, the blackouts, and that *thing* on your hand."

"And you believe it's true?"

"I don't command liars, Graham. I'll admit that if it hadn't come from one of my own, I would have ignored it.

You're lucky she insisted on going with you, otherwise this conversation would have gone differently."

Graham gave a grateful smile to Gregson in the corner.

"So," Captain Rigs continued. "Our main goal remains the destruction of the newly installed relays. To do that I need more people than we currently have. Watts is in the process of reaching these other groups of survivors around the city. If they will agree to meet somewhere safe, I can put the plan to them." Captain Rigs finished with a nod to Gregson, who approached the papers and maps, to point out the relevant areas.

"We've got fourteen of these new, bigger relays currently operating. They're circled in red here," she said. "To hit them all we'll need to spread our people a little thinly. Near to us there are six relays. We should be able to take them out without a problem, with enough of the EMPs that is. The rest will be for the other groups to hit by themselves. We're going to give them the designs for their own EMPs."

"I've been thinking about that," Graham jumped in to add. "After the bigger relays are gone I'm pretty certain the older, pre-existing network should kick back in."

"How certain, exactly?"

"Very. Years spent working with them while at Simova has shown me just how resilient they are. Just look what happened after Anthony's group overloaded the country's network. Even though a huge amount of them were destroyed, it still only took a year-and-a-half to get a majority of them working again. I know what the smaller relays can take."

"Excellent, that's good to know. Now, if one group fails it should still be possible to bring down the shield. The power needed to hold it over the city will be too much for one or two relays to maintain," Captain Rigs said. "There's no way of knowing exactly how many we'll need to take out, though. All we can do is treat them all as required. We'll need an EMP device for each target, so your friend, Jack,

will need help to make them for us. Gregson, you see to that. I want them ready by the time I get back from the meeting. Watts, what's your progress?"

"Sir, I've managed to speak with two of the three groups so far. Both have agreed to meet."

"Who are we missing?"

"I'm having trouble reaching the third group, led by this Petra Vuković woman."

"Wait, Petra Vuković?" Graham asked. "As in the city's main D-Stim dealer?"

"Yes, why?"

Graham rubbed the ridge above his eyes as he answered. "I've had the pleasure of meeting that old bag already. She nearly killed me and my sister Ruth. The only way she'll agree to do anything is if she gets something out of it."

"To save herself, I think she'll agree to help." Captain Rigs smiled at Graham, for the first time in a warm way too. "Seems we have everything we need. I want you with me at this meeting. If any of them are too stubborn or afraid to help us, I'll need you to convince them to change their minds. Informing them of help from your Sentient friends could be enough to bring these people on board."

"You got it," Graham replied. He felt a surge of confidence as they shook hands.

"We'll turn this chaos around. No-one can be allowed to stand against us again. With the shield finally down we'll show this Isaac exactly what we're made of."

"Sir, I've got the last group. They want to speak with you," Watts said, his hand over the microphone in front of him.

"About damn time," Captain Rigs answered with a sigh. "Graham, tell the others to be ready to leave in one hour. We'll head out to the meeting place early. I want everything prepared before our guests arrive."

Graham agreed with an awkward thumbs-up gesture, then left the room. As he closed the door behind him he met the younger version of himself standing there waiting, a look of disapproval on his face.

"I don't like being so buddy, buddy with that guy," it said.

"Not now," was all Graham cared to say in reply. He was too busy to allow such concerns to take hold.

The next few hours were going to prove the most important for their plan of attack. With the other survivors teaming up together and joining the fight it looked to be a goal they might actually be able to achieve. Yet Graham, in a moment of pessimism, reminded himself that success still hung in the balance, and from a thinning thread too.

* * *

"Do not move, brave warrior. We will soon have you to safety."

Stanley cracked open one eye to see the owner of the kind voice that had spoken to him. Only after a second of searching the illuminated face, he found his eye beginning to ache. He closed it again and returned to his own thoughts. They were nervous thoughts, thoughts of just what would happen to him if the friendly being kneeling beside his broken body knew of his true identity and purpose.

"You have survived against the greatest of odds, my fearless soul. Rest now." The voice carried much further across the coal-like landscape than expected. It spread out like a flock of winged creatures fluttering away. An echo took the words and softened them as they travelled afield.

The next thing Stanley felt was the warm touch from the small gathering of Sentients there to rescue him. They each gripped at his own glowing body - one he had stolen from the real owner - and slowly picked him up from the dust

ridden ground. He was to be carried to their land as a wounded soldier, a fallen comrade, who they would bring back to health through kindness and care.

And they would be sorely punished for it.

"How has he survived in such a place and in such a condition?" another of the Sentients asked. "All others have perished, so why is this one different?"

"It is not our place to question these things," the first replied. "One of our own has returned to us from the fight. He is to be treated as a hero. Only after he is safe and repaired can we then ask your questions."

For the next few minutes Stanley was spared more conversation and allowed the time to find some form of control over his racing mind. He was in enemy territory, yet they were showing him the greatest of respect. It put him in a state of confused apprehension. His identity was his secret burden, his cross to bear, and the one thing he could not share.

But something about the way they carried him aloft and talked of his bravery had rubbed off on him. Despite the fight they talked of, not being the one he had taken part in, he still agreed with their sentiment; in Isaac's eyes he hoped to be the hero these thought him to be.

The world around him soon changed into something more appealing. They had taken him out of the pockmarked battlefield he had been dumped in. They had moved on from where the fighting had once raged and where the scenery it had ravaged now lay desolate and lifeless. Suddenly things were a lot brighter and more angelic in appearance.

He would not be seduced by what he saw, though; these were demons, not angels.

"We have arrived," a Sentient down by Stanley's new legs said. "Open the gates."

He could not resist watching this happen around him. Even though his own glow caused pain for his virtual eyes -

a strange sensation considering his real body was still in the real world somewhere, he had to keep them open to see the entrance of the enemy's protected realm.

An enormous set of doors, almost twenty feet in height, slowly began to part in front of his tiny group. It had formed out of nothing but the dim hue of light this part of the world consisted of. Where a space had existed before, now a doorway had appeared that led into a miraculous scene. Beyond the entrance was another plane of existence, one that had nothing in common at all with the wider world it resided in.

The Sentients continued to carry him through their home, giving him the chance to take it all in. Everything he saw would be priceless for his master's cause. He had managed to do the one thing no-one else had ever succeeded in doing. He had made it past the enemy's defences, and inside their walls. Now his concern was in keeping up appearances for as long as possible while he searched for a weakness. Anything would do, even the smallest of exploits would suffice.

"Where are you taking me," he said. His voice shared no resemblance to his own at all. With his disguised form came someone else's tone too. Because of the injuries Isaac had inflicted upon him to cement this cover story he weaved, his sound was weak and without the same distance of travel. It still surprised him to hear his words coming through his mouth with another's voice attached.

"You must heal, great soldier. Your life-force is severely damaged. You must be fixed," came the reply.

Through the pathways and walkways of their home they took him. Along the way others would stop and stare as what they perceived as one of their own was carried past. They all appeared to lower their featureless heads in respect to the fallen. This lone survivor they had rescued from the battlefield was on show for all to see and admire.

Stanley was enjoying the attention. It was almost a shame to him that he would be the one to destroy them all.

Whoever had provided the base design for the Sentients' hidden world had lived a remarkably ordinary life, from what he saw. The more they had shown him the more he was sure it had come from one of his own. Strangely it appeared to have become a protective shell for the beings there. It was obvious to him that the Sentients had somehow mixed their code with that of this mystery human.

They had changed a lot of the different scenes here, turning what had been a linear flow into a chaotic and seemingly random amalgamation of them all. What logic had bound these places together had been removed for the convenience of those using it as their temporary home.

"He will be taken to the central memory segment."

Hearing this sealed it finally for Stanley. He had found his first truly remarkable piece of evidence to use against them. *So, this is all made of the memories from this one human?* he thought with a smile he knew would not appear for others to see; his new face lacked detail, as everyone else's did.

After another short trip through someone's memory lane it finally brought them all to the place of Stanley's recuperation. It sat within a long hall, with wooden beams across the ceiling that garnered a complex pattern of carvings all along them.

The Sentients would have no idea what the inside of a Church would look like, which explained the oddly placed split between memories. Where the rear wall should have sealed the room off, there now appeared an outside scene of sunshine in a park. These beings living within moved from one to another without any knowledge that it should not be that way.

Stanley was gently laid out on a wooden table set out where the alter once was. The Sentients who had carried

him through their world stepped back, bowed in another show of respect, then left.

He tried not to move too much, even to rid himself of the pain from his injuries. Even when the unexpected sound of splashing water met his ears, he remained still. From what he had seen along the way these memories were acting out in a kind of loop. The children he expected were playing in a fountain in the park scene beyond the church were doing so for as long as the memory lasted. They were just shadows of the real people, echoes of what had once been. It made everything he witnessed even more amazing, to know that the glowing beings were the reality and the people there were all but phantoms.

He lifted his head off of the table and looked to the approaching beings he heard enter the room. It was a shock for him to see at first. These beings were not hiding behind the anonymity of faceless bodies, but had taken form, human form. Two were as human as any he had ever known, yet one had failed miserably in that endeavour. It stood much taller than the other two and seemed more alien-like than even the Sentients without detail there.

"My friend, you have come back to us," the strangely disturbing looking being asked him, its stick-thin arms hanging by its side.

"Kindness, let him rest," the human in much smarter attire than the rest said. He then approached Stanley himself. "Please, do not move. You are badly injured. With time you will be able to tell us everything you have seen. But until you are well you should remain still."

The last of them to speak was an older gentleman. "He has sustained major damage. I see ruptures throughout his core. I suggest we ask others for help with this, he's going to require a lot of new energy to fix him."

"What do you think happened to the others?"

"I don't know, Luke. The last we saw of them they were fending off a whole team of enemy fighters. I thought for

sure they had all died. This one is incredibly lucky to have survived by itself."

The tallest of the three, by quite a lot, lowered itself to Stanley's height. It peered directly into his face and stared menacingly. For a short while he thought his disguise had failed him and they could see the real him beneath the glowing exterior. But after a second or two Kindness tried his best at a smile that reassured Stanley.

"You are proof that Isaac cannot beat us all," Kindness said. "You stood against him and live to tell the tale. All will hear of your bravery. Here today we witness the first of Isaac's failures."

"One of many to come too, wouldn't you agree, Stephen?" Luke added.

Stephen replied with a slow nod.

A smug kind of satisfaction at hearing this unexpectedly found Stanley. How little these poor souls really knew of their enemy. Where they saw a sign of hope it was in fact the very opposite. Stanley would be their downfall, their ultimate undoing. From the inside he planned to end them. And from the outside they were to collapse in.

"I will inform the rest," Kindness added before wandering away.

The other two remained silent. They looked to each other with varying degrees of worry written across their facsimiles of human faces. It became clear to Stanley that these two were less easy to trick. Despite his best attempts to seem like one of them, and in the face of his continued silence, they appeared uneasy with the situation. Their friend's instant reaction of pride and respect had failed to rub off on them. He would have to keep an eye on them both, or risk allowing them space to undermine him.

Lucky for him the next part of his mission was to be much easier than the first. Now inside, he could find their weakness, and he already knew roughly where to start. Only after a little investigation of his own would he be sure

he could do what was needed of him. Of course he had another problem to face before that. While his recovery proceeded he could go nowhere without raising suspicion. As soon as he was well enough he would act, and everything he saw around him would be torn down.

They had no idea how much trouble they were truly in.

Chapter 21

Friends and allies

Evening came, and the meeting time was fast approaching. Everything that could be done to ready the meeting place had been. Security, as far as was possible, had been set up around the inside. Guards were made up of those who had volunteered to help Captain Rigs. Although only lightly armed with lethal or non-lethal pistols, they were given patrol routes to walk throughout the building while the discussions were to happen on the ground floor.

It was not a place that stood out much, but every precaution was being taken regardless. The restaurant they waited in was perfectly set up to hold a friendly meeting of minds. It had been easy to secure too. Whoever had been hiding there once before had already sealed off the entrances with wooden boards.

Graham sat at a grand circular table in the middle of the room, with others of similar size radiating out from it. On each table sat a portable lamp they had brought from the basement. There were spaces set aside for around twelve people, more than enough to cater for those who were expected to turn up. Above him, and to the rear of the building, was the second floor mezzanine seating area, which looked down upon the ground floor. Positioned there were more of the guards. They were as much for show as for protection, judging by their very obvious presence.

Upstairs, sitting at their own private table, was Phoenix, Rhys and Jack. They had chosen to stay out of the way during the meeting. But they had still come prepared. Laying on their table were the oddly shaped rifles from before. Also, Jack had decided to bring a few of his trinkets along too. He was still puzzled by the devices and their intended purposes.

As for Gregson and Watts, they were nowhere to be seen.

"Right, they should be here any minute now. They were given instructions to enter through the rear of the building. The front is barricaded, so nothing can get in through there. Good, this is good," Captain Rigs said, while pacing the floor. He checked the position of his men once more. Each time he turned to retrace his steps he was compelled to double check the handheld radio hanging from his belt too. Without the use of his own tech he was having to work with Rhys' archaic collection instead. It was a black brick with a wired earpiece in comparison to his entirely wireless wrist screen.

"Do you have to do that? You're making me nervous," Graham snapped. Again his mind had been full of more voices than he would have liked. Hearing the real people around him making annoying little noises too was more than he could take. The pressure it was all creating inside his skull had shown no sign of lessening either.

"I'm sorry, but we need to get this right first time, otherwise we're on our own. You have to be ready to step in and explain what you know when I tell you. They only know the name of the enemy; they don't know what he's capable of."

"I can do better than that." Graham pulled a wrist screen device out of his pocket and set it down on the table. "I can show them. I brought Susan's recordings. If they don't believe us, then I can just show them the evidence."

"Excellent. Keep that hidden for now. I'll ask you for it when it's needed. And don't let them see that diamond on your hand either."

The door to the kitchen area at the rear of the first floor swung in and an armed man entered, his face red from running. "Captain Rigs, they're here."

After stopping his pacing to listen, Captain Rigs then walked around to the other side of the table and sat opposite Graham, his back to whoever was to enter from the kitchen. "Show them in."

Graham watched on behalf of the Captain as three people were shown inside the room through the swinging door. He gave a 'heads up' flick to confirm their entrance. Captain Rigs had made it clear this had to go down exactly as he wanted. While the visitors were shown inside he insisted on having his back to them, as a show of dominance. His casual nature toward the meeting sent a message to those attending that he had no nerves or doubt at all. Even if the opposite was in fact true.

His pacing from earlier proved it to be an act.

"Who's in charge here," a short, stocky man in a grey Parka said. He appeared to be the leader of this threesome. His two friends were never far from his side and stood with a hand each resting in a pocket of their own coats. No-one doubted the reason for this; they were just as well armed as Graham's group.

"That would be me." Captain Rigs stood after a moment of silence, only turning to face them when he was entirely ready. "My name is Captain Rigs."

"What are you, a soldier or something?"

"SAS, if you must know. Is this all of you?" Captain Rigs asked, after a quick scan of the three of them.

"Yes. So, are we doing this or not?"

"We're still waiting on the others. While we wait, why don't you tell us a little about your group. Care to sit?"

The lead man took a quick look around to the guards eyeing him right back. "I suppose." He then walked over to the seat to the left of Graham and pulled it out for himself. His companions stood behind, creating a kind of protective bubble around him. To get to him would be difficult now. The paranoia among them was high, to say the least. "There's not much to tell really. When it all kicked off and this Isaac fella introduced himself it all went to hell. My job before this all started was as a Firefighter, so I know a thing or two about surviving in bad situations. I took my family to the nearest station to hide out and we've been there ever since."

"Have you seen much of the fighting going on around the city?" Captain Rigs sat down and leant back on his chair.

"We've seen our fair share, sure. The station has been hit a few times, mostly during the night. So far they haven't found us, or the people we've taken in."

"How many of you are there?"

The man stared for a moment at the table as he considered. "Let's see how this goes first, OK. If I don't agree then I'm gone, understood?"

"Fair enough."

"I'm Brian," the man said, his hand extended out ready to shake.

A whistle interrupted them before they could seal the friendship in any official capacity. Captain Rigs spun around in his chair to see the kitchen door open again and a guard leaning through it. He looked angry at first, but then realised what was going on. "Who is it?" he said.

"Some old lady and a couple of rather large men," the guard replied.

Graham's imaginary friends were never far from his mind and arrived to the party exactly as he had come to expect. Thankfully, they were staying invisible to him for now. They were never going to stay silent for long, though. "This should be interesting," the younger Graham said.

"Petra, I presume," Captain Rigs called out as he stood and greeted those entering. "Thank you for agreeing to this meeting."

Brian also stood. He unbuttoned his thick Parka and let it hang loose around him. Graham spotted the pistol sticking out of Brian's belt instantly.

"We make this quick. I will leave soon." Petra wandered slowly past Captain Rigs, ignored everyone else in the room entirely, then picked her own place at the table to sit. She placed her walking stick hard against the side of the table, which made a loud smacking noise as it came to rest. The four men with her did their best to help her comfortably into a seat. One pulled it out ready for her, while another lowered her down into it. She did not look at all pleased to be there.

"She's ug-ly," the child Graham said with particular emphasis on the 'ug'.

"OK, someone explain exactly how this old bag could have gotten here without being seen?" one of the other voices in his head said.

Pipe down, Graham thought in reply.

"So," Petra began. She produced a cigarette from an inside pocket and placed it in her mouth for one of her men to light. Her first puff was loud and crackly as she sucked on the stick. "You have way of making city safe again?"

"Hi, my name's—"

"I do not care about your name. Get on with it," Petra insisted, cutting off the Captain.

"We're not all here yet," Brian said. "You can wait just like the rest of us."

"Shut your mouth, Prick."

Captain Rigs raised his hands in mediation. "Hey, take it easy. I'm sure the last group will be here soon. I gave you all different times to prevent everyone arriving at once. The best way of attracting undue attention to our meeting would be to have you all queuing to get in."

"Fine," Brian said.

Petra, on the other hand, simply turned her head to the side.

A short while later and the last of those expected arrived, with their own small entourage too. Everyone already waiting stood to greet the new arrivals - all except for Petra that is, who barely looked toward the door to acknowledge them.

"Now we can begin." Captain Rigs approached the latest arrivals to greet them properly this time. He had no doubt noticed how he had lost some ground to Petra; she was threatening to take charge. "Come, take a seat. My name is Captain Rigs, this is Brian, and this lovely lady is Petra Vuković."

The mention of Petra's name made one of the new arrivals, an older black gentleman wearing thick brown-rimmed glasses, shoot a look of contempt her way. The man then laughed to himself. Something about the situation he found himself in had him ready to chuckle out loud.

"What is funny here?" Petra shot back with.

"You don't remember me, do you?" the man said. "Well I remember you well enough. I've busted most of your thugs over the last ten years. Why am I not surprised to learn you've survived this long?"

"Ah, Conrad...Erm...Oh yes, Conrad Robinson. The policeman." Petra clicked her fingers at him when the name finally came to her. "Have you not retired yet?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Conrad turned to a petite Indian girl by his side. "Time to report back, Nessa. Tell Derek we're in and we'll be in touch soon."

Nessa retreated to one of the smaller tables and began to work away on a tablet computer. Evidently they had found power too and could use some of the modern tech to their advantage.

"OK, we're all here," Captain Rigs said to prevent anyone else from speaking first. He wanted to keep conversation to

a minimum. Time was always a commodity in short supply.

Conrad left the three other men he had arrived with and walked to the table, his eyes surveying the thick set men behind Petra. He was offered the seat where Captain Rigs had been before.

"So," Captain Rigs started as soon as he reached the other side of the table, where Graham sat watching those across from him. "I assume you are all aware of the enemy relay that was destroyed a few days ago? The people who did that are here with us. Let me introduce one of them, Phoenix can you join us?"

"Sure," she called from her raised position on the second floor. Everyone waited as she took the steps to the ground floor two at a time. When she reached the bottom she was faced with a blockade of muscular men in her way. She shoved Petra's men aside to make room for herself.

"Ah, yes. Phoenix, one of my best customers," Petra said.

Phoenix tried not to make eye contact with her former dealer and instead looked to Graham.

So far Petra's memory had failed her greatly in reminding her of her and Graham's previous involvement. She remembered Phoenix well enough, but they had met many times before it seemed - whenever Phoenix had needed more D-Stims. In terms of Graham, she had only seen him once, and on that occasion she had been seconds away from shooting him when a message from The Sentient Collector had stopped her.

There was no way Graham was going to jog her memory on that one. Instead he chose to remain silent, in case his voice was enough to change that.

"This is one of the people responsible," Captain Rigs went on. "She took out the relay with only a few pipe bombs and an EMP."

"EMP? How the hell did you get your hands on an EMP?" Brian asked, leaning forward in his seat.

"That's the thing. They made one, more than one in fact. We have instructions on how to make them. With only a few pieces you will be able to make one as well. Hardest to find is the household supplies for the pipe bombs that go inside it. As for the coil you'll need, and any electronics, all of the old relays contain them inside." Captain Rigs beamed with pride as he shared this with the others. Unfortunately, one of those sitting at the table had become distracted by something.

"Don't I know you?" Conrad asked Phoenix.

"Me? I doubt it," she replied.

"No, I'm pretty sure I've seen you somewhere before."

Brian interjected with an obvious desire to move on. "So what? You're a cop, you probably arrested her once. Can we get back to it, please?"

"Sorry. It's just...never mind." Conrad finally conceded and returned to listening to the Captain.

"Right. As I was saying, we can help you make an EMP too. But I'm here to ask more of you. There is a real chance that we can make a difference, we could turn this fight around, with what I propose here tonight. You see, I need your help. I was sent into the city to do one thing; destroy the relays that hold the shield above our heads. That was the plan anyway. My entrance did not quite go to plan and I lost most of my team of soldiers. Needless to say, things have not gone well so far. If not for the people who took me and my men in, we would be dead by now.

"That is when I found out about the EMPs the group used against the relay. My superiors had no idea an EMP would work, they all assumed Isaac would have protected them against such an attack. Yet here we are. But what's the point in having this knowledge if we aren't going to use it effectively. Others want to continue chipping away at the enemy until something gives. I, instead, suggest a more immediate tactic. Isaac won't expect a joint strike on every one of his new, larger relays at once."

Brian was the first to speak. He seemed excited by the prospect of fighting back. "And so what, you want us to help you do that?"

"Yes." Captain Rigs leant on the table and looked to each in turn. "We only need to hit enough of them to weaken the shield. Then, when it is about to fail, my superiors will order their own attack. As soon as we set off each EMP by their target relay the signal will be sent to them, like smoke signals to a distant traveller."

"OK," Conrad said. "After we've set off these devices, what do we do?"

"The best thing you can do is return to your hiding places and wait it out. You won't want to be on the streets when it starts, that will be the first place the fighting will happen. I expect Isaac will throw everything he's got at us. Be out of the way and let me and my people deal with the threat. Isaac has had it easy so far."

Conrad nodded. "I think we can all agree the fight has been far too one-sided up to this point. But attacking the relays carries a high amount of risk in itself. Are we all sure we can handle such a thing? I mean, there are a lot less of us than there is of the enemy."

"That's why I need your help. I need more people than I currently have to pull this off."

The room fell silent after that. Each party took a moment to think over the proposal. They all knew their own limitations, but had to guess about the others sat across from them. All they had to go on was what Captain Rigs had told them, which was hardly anything at all. The meeting had become about how well one could predict the other, like they played a game of poker. If any one of them took to bluffing, then the entire plan would fail. Only actions that could be backed up were going to help it succeed.

Petra pressed her cigarette into the table top to extinguish it, breaking the silence. She then spoke. "I agree to this. My men will help you."

"OK, so that makes one of you," Captain Rigs said. "What about the rest of you? Are you in?"

With a creak of his chair and a slight grunt, Conrad got up and decided to walk over to his young Indian friend. He replied as he left the table. "Let me check in with the others first. I'll have an answer for you in a few minutes."

"Of course." Captain Rigs then focused on the last member to agree.

"Fine. Give us the EMP plans first and then we'll talk about more." Brian slid his chair back and went to stand when Captain Rigs spoke again.

Graham knew what was to follow. He also knew his time to speak would be soon too. Now that the three of them had shown an interest in helping, it was just left to tell them the rest of the plan. Somehow he did not expect this part to go so well.

"There's one more thing to explain," the Captain said.

Brian and Petra both looked to him with untrusting eyes, as though they expected bad news of some kind.

"How much do you all know about Isaac?"

"From the messages he was broadcasting across the city in the first few days of the fight, we know enough." Brian kept his seat away from the table. "It's that bloody Simova AI."

"Yes, I too have heard this," Petra added.

Conrad spoke up from his table a few metres away. "Hang on a sec, Derek." He then spoke to the rest of the group. "It's not just Isaac we have to worry about, though. Before this started, I was a detective in charge of a multiple murder case and I saw exactly what he's been doing to the people he takes. He's had help all along too. Some high up people were involved from the very beginning. They've allowed him to operate in the shadows of the city."

"Exactly. So you all understand how crucial it is that he be stopped, at all cost," Captain Rigs said. "There is a problem with doing that, however. He has access to another

world, a virtual world. If he escaped into that world, he would be beyond our reach. Now, this is where it gets really strange. There is a faction of AIs inside this virtual world that are ready to fight with us. If we all do our part well enough, then Isaac could be defeated finally."

"What? Why even tell us this?" Brian interrupted.

"Because you all need to know exactly what you're getting yourselves into. You have to understand that if these other AIs fail to keep Isaac engaged then he'll be much harder for us to fight. We're placing a lot on this part of the plan succeeding. If he's distracted and busy fighting two battles at once, we should be able to overwhelm him. That's when it will truly end, when Isaac is removed from this world and the other together at once."

"You know the location of Isaac?" Petra said, with a look to one of her men stood behind her chair.

"Not yet, no. But I'm confident we will soon after the shield is down. Before now the military has relied on visual systems alone. A full, unblocked, scan of the city should help weed him out."

"And what if it doesn't?" Brian pulled his chair forward, hitting his chest against the table.

Conrad spoke before the Captain could think of the best way to reassure them. "I can help you find him."

"What, how?" Graham said. His first words of the meeting had everyone staring at him in surprise.

"I have someone who might know."

Captain Rigs moved toward Conrad. "And?"

"And we haven't found a way to make him talk just yet. He's told us some things that have us worried, though. We know there's more to Isaac's plan than just making soldiers." Conrad turned to speak to Phoenix mid-sentence. "What did you say your name was again?"

She gave no answer in return. Graham could see Conrad was desperate to remember where he had seen her before.

A worrying thought crossed his mind soon after; what if Conrad knew of her past?

Unfortunately, the thought was broken by something much more threatening to their meeting than that.

"Hey, look it's flashing." Jack leapt to his feet and held one of his gadgets out to them over the second floor railing, its light signalling something to them.

A finger shot directly up to Captain Rigs' ear told Graham all he needed to know. The only reason anyone would have for speaking to him through his earpiece was to warn of danger. Jack's small device had already detected what was going on.

"How many?" Captain Rigs said. "Gregson, do you see them too?"

"See who?" Graham asked, only to be cut short by the Captain's other finger raised in the air to stop him.

"OK, hold your fire." Captain Rigs then began to order his guards about the room with hand gestures alone. When they had all scattered to their designated positions, he finally explained what was going on. "There's a small group of enemy soldiers heading down the road outside. I have two of my people set up in the building opposite. They're following the patrol with high-calibre sniper rifles, so we're covered if we need to leave."

"Shit, I need to get back to my people." Brian stood and was about to head for the kitchen door when Petra's men blocked him. "What are you doing? Get out of my way."

"I tire of hearing his voice. End him," Petra ordered casually.

Each of the four men with her produced a sawn-off shotgun from their coats and took aim at a member of the group. The obvious reaction from those now staring down the double barrels pointing at them was to pull out their own weapon and aim it back. Within seconds every person there had a gun either aimed at them or were aiming theirs at someone else. No-one dare say a word for the first few

moments. Even the person who had drawn first now stood still, unsure of what to do next.

Graham remained in his seat and looked around in fear as the standoff continued. His own weapon was only a Taser pistol Captain Rigs had given him. Despite it having no chance of taking out the shotgun staring him down a few feet away, he kept it pointing back.

"OK, I think we all need to calm down a little here," Captain Rigs said, his own weapon hovering roughly in the direction of Petra's nose. "There's no need for this to escalate any more than it already has. So, why don't we all just lower our guns and—"

"Don't waste your breath." Brian kept his enraged glare solely on the thug in front of him. "We can't deal with these fucking animals."

"Animal, you call me animal?" Petra said with a snigger. "I spit in your face. I have seen enough here. You are no threat to Isaac. I will enjoy watching him kill you all."

"Wait, what do you mean by that?" Graham asked.

"I will not die here today, with you. I will live much longer. If I am animal, then you are prey. And Isaac is my keeper."

"Holy shit, she sold us out." Phoenix moved her own weapon from the large man next to her and aimed at Petra instead. "You fucking bitch! What have you done?"

"I survive because I am clever. I make deal with Isaac: I live, you die." Petra, being the only one without a weapon, had no need to remain at all and decided to slowly stand and begin hobbling toward the kitchen door.

"Repeat, Gregson, say again," Captain Rigs shouted suddenly. He lowered his gun to his side and ran for the boarded up window at the front of the room. Everyone else stayed still and with their guns frozen in place. All except for Petra, who continued on her gradual journey toward the exit. "Oh shit."

"Have you not noticed the guns waving around in here? What the hell are you doing?" Brian called out to the Captain.

The response garnered a loud intake of air from most in the room.

"We're surrounded!" Captain Rigs answered. The wind had all but been knocked out of him after seeing the lights from the drones outside their building. They were not only surrounded; they were completely outgunned too.

"Well, this all went rather splendidly, didn't it?" Graham heard the oldest of the voices in his head say.

Chapter 22

Convergence

As Petra neared the kitchen door her bodyguards all made their own way toward her. Each took small steps away from the rest of the group with their weapons still raised. They were getting away and no-one in the room could do a thing about it. If even one of them were to fire their gun it was going to bring a whole storm of chaos down upon them.

Just outside the front of the building were three drones floating a few metres above the ground and shining their bright lights about the street. None there doubted what they were looking for too; Petra had to have given the enemy their location. So it was just a matter of time before the drones would begin firing.

"What are they waiting for out there? Why don't they just shoot already?" Rhys said as loudly as he dared from his position on the second floor. Up to now he had kept his presence quiet. Once the standoff had begun he had already selected most of the targets using the eye-tracking function of his rifle.

Captain Rigs pushed the loose piece of wood he had moments ago removed to see outside back into place. "They won't shoot while one of their own is inside. Isn't that right, Petra?"

"Do not speak to me," she replied.

"Gregson," the Captain said, his hand up again to his earpiece. "Under no circumstances are you to allow any of

Petra's men outside alive. Do you understand? Good."

"You cannot stop me, fool. Your snipers cannot see me through wall. I leave this place now."

"My people don't need to see *you* to shoot you down, just your heat signature."

This made Petra rethink her dismissive stance. She slowly turned to face Captain Rigs, no doubt testing his resolve. If they were playing a game of cards then she was now working the numbers, trying to figure out the chances of him being able to back up his threat. In the end she chose not to believe it. She laughed before reaching for the door to swing it open.

"Take your pick, Gregson," the Captain said.

A moment later and the first casualty had been claimed. One of Petra's men fell to the floor after a tiny puff of red mist popped out from the side of his head, spraying a light spatter of blood across the wall behind him.

Everyone shot a look in the direction of the dead man. Graham did the same, then turned to see where the bullet had entered from. He saw a neat little hole in one of the highest wooden planks blocking out the window. Gregson's shot had silently broken through it and carried on to the target, all without anyone noticing.

"You bastard." To the surprise of all in the room, Petra went for the shotgun in another of her men's hands and fired it straight into the nearest person. The unfortunate target this time was one of Brian's guards, who flew back across the table behind him and tumbled away.

"No," Brian shouted as he lunged forward with his pistol. If not for the last of his men holding him back, he would have tried to take on his enemies singlehanded.

"Everyone, shut the fuck up." Graham brought their attention to the sudden humming noise coming from outside. They could all guess what it signified; the drones had found them.

"Oh Christ. Get down!" Captain Rigs' voice boomed as loudly as a jet engine at full throttle.

The warning caused all inside to launch themselves to the ground and cover their heads as best they could. Almost as soon as they did the attack began.

Each of the three car-sized drones unleashed their full arsenal into the room, blowing the wooden planks blocking the windows to pieces. They fired beams of bright red energy that tore through everything in their path, reducing anything and anyone they touched to searing chunks. The noise from each craft's weapon deafened everyone caught in their sights.

Then came the ground force's attack. While the drones punched a widening hole in the front of the building they stepped forward and fired together.

Graham slid across the ground on his stomach to get away from the burning debris raining down upon him. He pulled at the table leg and crawled beneath. The gun in his hand only made his movements harder, so he threw it away. The others around him were in a similar amount of panic as they wriggled and squirmed along the floor.

"Use the tables," Captain Rigs yelled as loud as he could.

The table Graham hid beneath was tossed over to form a wooden shield for those able to get to it to lay behind. Anyone too far away tried to copy with a table nearer to them. Even Rhys up on the second floor had decided to do this, with Jack's help. But any protection the tables provided was easily overcome by only a short burst of ear-piercingly loud firing from the drones. Within seconds they were already beginning to disintegrate the wooden shields.

Through the swinging door to the kitchen Graham could see Petra and her men making their way to the exit without any apparent rush to their walking. Somehow the barrage was missing them completely. Like a swarm of bees under her command, the bullets attacked everyone but her.

"We have to get out of here." Graham had to shout at the top of his lungs just for the Captain to hear him a few feet away.

There was no real point in putting up a fight while the enemy were so intent on demolishing the entire place. Yet Captain Rigs was still managing to fire off a couple of desperate shots of his own. "Watts, Gregson, what's your situation, come in," he called into his radio. "We're pinned down and need cover fire. Take out what you can."

Brian rolled over onto his back behind the table as his last man landed next to him. A thick mouthful of blood poured out of the man's mouth and nose. He choked hard, sputtered a few times, then became silent. "We're dying here," Brian said.

Hiding behind another table, to the side, was Conrad with his own people all around, one of which was now dead as well. He held the young Indian girl in his arms to protect her from the bullets. The two other men with him knelt down inside one of the small booths along the side wall of the restaurant and took pot-shots back at the enemy. Somehow Phoenix had become caught up in their group and was trying her best to get a clear shot with her rifle, from the cover of another booth.

It was chaos. Graham could see each of the people there trying to fight their own battle, with no coordination at all. There was simply no chance to find any form of structure to their firing. It was a matter of survival, and nothing else would be allowed for now. Still Graham found himself distracted by the sight of Petra and her men wandering away without a care in the world.

If anything, this annoyed him more than being trapped and under attack.

For a split second he thought he had been the only one to hear as a sharp metallic sound followed another beam of energy from the drones. It was only when Brian cheered in delight that he realised it had not been. He saw one of the

drones react violently, spinning around and trying to correct an unstable wobble before firing into the building opposite. One of its eight large rotors was hanging half off.

Either Gregson or Watts had fired, with pinpoint accuracy, and destroyed a piece of the enemy craft.

The quick distraction was enough to bring a swift order from Captain Rigs. "Hit it again, hit the fucker again," he screamed with sudden rage.

Another shot caused the middle drone to burst into flames as the bullet cut right through a fuel line. An arch of flames reached away from the craft as it frantically searched for a target, before lurching forward. While the other two drones turned their attention to the offices behind them, the damaged one began its last journey, into the front of the restaurant.

"It's gonna hit us," Graham bellowed to everyone around him.

As the drone nosedived into the concrete pavement its front crumbled and split open, exposing the metal structure underneath its outer casing. It continued to scrape across the ground until smashing through the window frame of the restaurant, where it finally came to rest. It now presented a small chance for those trapped inside. Its half destroyed body was covering the entrance and blocking any of the ground soldiers from entering.

"Holy shit," Phoenix said. She leapt into the air with excitement.

But her celebration was cut short when the grounded drone jerked and jittered. The thing was still far from dead and appeared determined to get them. As its energy weapon whirled again, ready to fire, it was clear the fight would go on. Luckily for them the drone was in no position to aim accurately. Instead it fired into the ground in frustration, spitting its anger with a growl and a rumble.

"Now, go, everyone, out the back." The Captain forced himself up to give his order. He then began pulling the

others from cover and shoving them toward the, now entirely full of holes, swinging door.

Graham was grabbed and pulled to his feet soon after and sent spinning in the direction of the exit. He did not hang around to see what the others were doing and instead followed the man in front of him. Without any idea who was leading and who was following, he chose a body and kept it ahead of him.

In the background, the sound of something trying to remove the remains of the drone made him move as fast as he could. He ran past the vast metal cookers and work stations, rushed through the burning hallway and then finally made it out into the night.

The first thing that hit him upon making it outside was the smell of burning. He turned around and saw smoke billowing up into the purple tinted night sky. It was coming from the front of the building where the enemy craft had crashed. It meant only one thing to him; Gregson and Watts were now blind to what was happening. Taking out any more of the enemy would be near to impossible with so much smoke and heat about them.

"We can't let Petra get back to her people," the older voice inside Graham's head told him.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he replied as the air in his lungs became hot and uncomfortable.

"If she gets away she'll tell Isaac about Captain Rigs' plan to destroy the relays. Someone has to stop her."

More sped out through the rear exit of the restaurant to find Graham standing there, struggling to catch his breath. First came Brian, then came Rhys and Jack, a few of the volunteers from the basement - much less than had gone there - and finally Captain Rigs.

Jack was badly hurt, with a red streak across his neck that seeped blood between his fingers. He stood leaning against Rhys.

"Jesus, is he OK?" Graham asked.

"He was hit by debris. But if I can get him back to the basement in time, he should be OK. Wait, where's Phoenix?" Rhys returned with.

Graham felt a sudden rush of panic as he thought over his escape. He swore he had seen her running behind him only moments ago. So where was she?

"Where's Conrad and his people?" Captain Rigs then added.

Crunching and crashing sounds erupted from the other side of the building as the drone carcass was removed. It would next be up to the ground forces to make their way inside the building and clear out anyone left behind.

Rhys was first to realise this. "Here, take Jack," he said.

"What are you doing?" Graham grabbed at Rhys' arm to stop him. "You'll die if you go back in there."

"She might be inside still. Let me go, I have to try. I can't lose her."

A shot rang out from inside that made Rhys fight against them a moment later. Only the combined force of Graham, Captain Rigs and a few others could hold him back.

Of those remaining, Brian was less inclined to hang around, seeing as the enemy were fast approaching. "Look, I'm in, OK. Contact me in a few hours and we'll talk more. Now get the hell out of here. They'll be looking for us for a while before they give up."

"I agree." Captain Rigs took a firm hold of Brian's arm and shook it hard.

But as Brian left, Graham could not get his mind past one point. He had to share it with the Captain as the others began to drag Rhys away. "We can't leave, not yet," he said.

Captain Rigs stopped suddenly, his eyebrows drawn down over his eyes. "Why?"

"What about Petra? She knows the plan."

"Shit, you're right. OK. She can't have gotten far." The Captain returned his hand to his ear again. "Gregson,

Watts, report." This time he allowed the response to come through his radio loud enough for them all to hear.

"We're heading to you, sir," Gregson replied.

"Negative. Relocate to a safe area and search for Petra. We need a location, quickly."

"Sure, but sir, the enemy soldiers are swarming the place. You'll be overrun in a few minutes if you don't get out of there."

"Understood. If you find Petra and have a clear shot, take it. She cannot be allowed to escape."

"Affirmative, sir," Watts said this time.

"OK, everyone who's not coming with me should return to the basement. Remember to stay low and out of sight. Go." Captain Rigs set off in the other direction, he did not wait for anyone to join him.

In that short moment Graham decided something he never imagined he would have before becoming involved in Isaac's war. As he watched Captain Rigs jog away by himself he made a choice to help. He was no fighter, yet in the pit of his stomach dwelled a new anger. One he knew could not be sated by retreat. For too long he had been on the periphery of it all. Now he wanted to get his hands dirty.

The younger voice in his head agreed with a fist-bumping call to arms. "Fuck em up, dude!"

Graham let the others run for nearby cover and then did the same the other way. He quickly caught up to the Captain at the end of the alleyway.

"What are you playing at, Graham. Go back with the rest of them."

"You can't take them all on by yourself. I can help."

"And how are you going to do that, you're not even armed?"

"Then give me another weapon."

With a reluctant sigh, Captain Rigs ripped a small pistol from his chest that had been attached by Velcro straps. He

handed it over before creeping slowly away. "Don't lose this one."

Behind them came the sound of the restaurant as it collapsed in on itself while they snuck away and into the shadows. They went as far as they could without leaving cover, which only took them to the end of the street. The destruction and havoc still going on back at the restaurant continued while they left quietly. Isaac again appeared only interested in complete annihilation of his enemies. Rather than a structured attack, he had settled for another devastating barrage.

Captain Rigs stopped suddenly at the corner of a building and peered around it. He kept his rifle lowered but ready to fire if needed. Soon enough Graham heard a rustle from nearby that told him what was there.

"Gotcha," Captain Rigs whispered. Another blast from the restaurant had no effect on him at all. He was solely focused on the voices a few metres away from them.

Petra was arguing with one of her men. She spoke only in Polish, but from the back and forth of the conversation it was obvious she was unhappy with how things had gone. She snapped at every response she got in reply.

"How many are with her?" Graham asked.

"Two men."

"She arrived with four. One was shot. So where's the other one?"

"It doesn't matter. They aren't with her now. Gregson took one of them out. Right, you stay here, I've got this."

Before Graham could tell him otherwise, Captain Rigs was already leaving cover. He walked slowly and cautiously. With silent steps he made his way closer to Petra's group, who were moving as fast as Petra's elderly frame would allow. The nearer he got the more he raised his rifle and took aim at the first of Petra's men. For betraying her own race, she was set to pay with the blood of her and her thugs.

Graham jumped when Captain Rigs stepped on a piece of glass that crunched beneath his feet. Petra spotted him immediately after hearing the same thing and shot a piercing look his way. As for her men, Captain Rigs gave neither of them the chance to react. He fired two shots, one for each head that presented itself to him. Both men slumped forward, tumbling all the way to the ground with a face-smacking thud against the pavement.

Petra did all she could to keep her enemy at bay by swinging her walking stick out at him. She waved it through the air in a panic. It did nothing to prevent Captain Rigs from kicking her legs from under her and sending her reeling in pain. She landed in the pile along with her two remaining men. "Please, I help you, I take you with me," she pleaded.

"Not this time. You turned your back on your own kind, and for what?"

"I do these things to stay alive. I do it because I have no choice."

While taking his time to aim, Captain Rigs said, "Then you can die for your choices."

He failed to see what Graham had a split second later; the third guard with her, who until then had been hidden.

"Drop it, asshole," the guard ordered as he touched his pistol against Captain Rigs' neck.

"Do something, G." Graham's younger personality said. As usual it was the more gung-ho of the voices in his head.

The other had more restraint, usually. "You can take him."

Without hesitation, Graham stepped forward and fired the remainder of the bullets in his pistol into the back of his enemy. He continued to pull the trigger well after it had clicked empty. But the man was still standing. The bullets had found him well enough and embedded deep into his body, yet he could still fire his own weapon.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Captain Rigs yelled as the gun fired right beside his ear. In a flash he reacted and attacked the man. Knowing exactly how long it would take to reverse his rifle around and take aim, he quickly turned to another weapon instead, one that needed no time to prime or load.

He yanked a jagged blade from another Velcro pocket and forced it up through the man's chin. While the man wriggled and gurgled on his own blood, the knife continued. Captain Rigs did not stop until he was completely satisfied he had reached the brain stem.

As soon as the body was released it toppled over backwards, leaving Captain Rigs standing in front of Petra with a bucket-load of blood down him. Petra screamed out in terror as he looked sidelong at her. The face he displayed was one of calmness; killing had temporarily shut off his emotions. Now all that was left was for a single shot to Petra's wrinkled up face.

She fell silent mid scream.

"Jesus, you're bleeding," Graham said as he approached.

The shot that had been fired beside the Captain's head had evidently caused some damage inside, as blood was now dribbling out of his ear. All he could say in return to Graham's concern was, "We need to get back to the basement."

He then wandered past Graham without saying a word more.

Chapter 23

Two steps back, one step forward

The soft grass beneath Stanley's feet swayed gently to the rhythm of the breeze. He watched as it moved, felt the way it stroked his skin, and smiled. His recovery had been quick and now he could finally explore the world these Sentients had made for themselves. It was so real, so very human, and yet things were not as they seemed. Because paradise had a pest problem.

He still could not deny it was a beautiful place to be. A park with a strong heat from the sun above held his attention like a piece of artwork hanging on a wall. He studied every detail around him, picked out every colour and structure he could find. In the direction he looked it all appeared completely ordinary, with buildings out in the distance and trees lining the periphery. However, when he turned his head, even a little bit to one side, the illusion fell apart.

Behind him the scenery stopped dead at a strange boundary line. Past this was the church he had spent a good few hours resting in and thinking about his mission. It invaded this perfect afternoon scene like a gaping hole in time and space. Except that the phantom-like people there with him, who existed as part of the memory only, ignored it completely. They walked behind the image of the church or entered through it and on to a memory they were never a part of before.

The different areas were mixing together in odd ways.

Every now and then a glowing body would also enter the park too, but none of them stayed for long. Something was obviously going on as they all now moved with great urgency. They walked past him in the direction of another invading scene without stopping. The park was nothing more than a thoroughfare. Although part of the reason why none of them stopped was possibly due to the strangeness of Stanley's actions. They had no doubt seen him exploring the park and wondered what in the world he was doing.

In fact, he had another motivation altogether. He was not enjoying this view for his own pleasure at all, but for the sake of his mission. Now he had been left alone and could walk freely without anyone fussing over him, he could begin his search. Anything he saw that could be exploited, any loose thread that could be pulled, was of interest to him.

He strolled casually on, with a keen eye on the movement of the fluffy clouds above. For a short while he had watched them float by, noting the way they reset to their original place after a set amount of time. The memory was on a permanent loop, as were the rest of them too. Except when this scene restarted he saw something strange each time. With each cycle it flashed and flickered before settling down again.

Another restart was soon to occur. He had counted it down almost exactly on the last and expected to be equally as precise again. This time he planned to be near the boundary of the next scene, one to his right that appeared to contain a nightclub and people partying away. Lucky for him it appeared a memory of a New Year's Eve party. He was using the countdown to the end of the year to keep his own count roughly correct.

The cloud he had thought resembled an iced bun was getting close to the edge of the boundary line again. This was the last object to cross before the scene reset each time. It would only get half way over the line, and would

then suddenly disappear and reappear on the other side of the sky. He watched as it moved slowly, nearing the point of his real interest; the almost seamless cut between worlds.

Three, two, one, he counted in his head.

Then it happened. A flash, a flicker and then the entire scene was back to the beginning. His mind popped with a quick feeling of excitement as the thing he had waited to see again happened. The scene might have reset but the boundary was a little behind. A neon glow permeated the join as it sealed. These two separate memories did not seem as strongly linked as they should be.

When Stanley's finger passed right through the bright light of the boundary line he laughed. The reaction took him by complete surprise. To hide his all too obvious pride at having found a weakness in the Sentients' world, a chink in their seemingly impermeable armour even, he pulled his hand back and cradled it against his chest.

Before getting too excited, he knew he should do the same in another of the memories first. He decided that the nightclub scene would be next; he quite fancied having a little celebration after his success.

Unfortunately, a hand on his shoulder soon broke that thought. He turned to see Luke standing there waiting for him. His arm fell to his side. He did not feel like celebrating anymore. Another test was coming, this time from the Sentient faction. Failing this test, however, would break his cover. That, he vowed, was not going to happen.

"Hello, my friend," Luke said.

Stanley deliberated for a second before replying. He worried about his voice. He had not spoken much since arriving and was unsure the voice coming from his mouth would be his or that of his illuminated disguise.

"Hello." Thankfully it was as fuzzy and distorted as before.

"I trust you are well rested?"

"Yes. Thank you. What's going on? Everyone seems very busy."

"We are preparing for battle." With a swing of his arm toward the church, Luke ushered Stanley onward. "In the meantime, the others would like to speak with you, about your miraculous survival."

"Miraculous?" Stanley asked.

Luke ignored the response. "Please, this way."

They entered the church scene in silence, which Stanley would otherwise have considered appropriate if not for the uneasiness hanging over them. Luke clearly had doubts about his lone survival story.

After another short tour of the uneven landscape, and seemingly tacked-on detours they passed along the way, they soon arrived in a small home setting. In what should have been the lounge now sat a gathering of small Sentients. They all watched an adult Sentient at the front, who pointed to symbols and weird figures on the wall. Stanley had to stop for a moment to see it for himself.

They were teaching their young.

He was soon moved on by the teacher with a friendly wave that made the class turn and stare at him. Some even appeared to whisper to their friend and giggle among themselves. They saw the brave warrior standing before them like some kind of celebrity. To them he was hope, possibly even a chance for salvation.

For a short while, maybe a few seconds, Stanley felt ever so slightly guilty about this.

Luke took him further into the memory, up a staircase and into what should have been a study. As with all other parts of this upturned world though, it instead led into another scene altogether. It led into a dark cave with high ceilings and computer screens on the leftmost wall. He had never seen anything like this before, yet he knew it had once existed. In the centre of the room stood a huge cube,

roughly two metres in size, and with swirling shapes moving freely inside.

"Welcome home, friend," Stephen called out from the wall of screens. "Do you like what we've done with the place?"

With a quick look around, Stanley then replied, "It is indeed impressive," he said. He noticed a room-length shutter just beyond a window to his right, as well as a small seating area in one corner. Of course, his disguise did not come with the memories of the previous owner. He could not be certain he had enough to even pretend he knew it. The truth was it was the most Sentient looking place he had seen so far.

"I know it's not quite right. Graham's memories of Sanctuary are only short. He was only here for a few hours after all. Still, I think you'll agree it will do nicely." Stephen tapped a few keys on the computer keyboards in front of him. In the centre of the room, the cube suddenly turned over and disappeared into the floor. In its place came a long wooden table, with chairs ready and waiting for them.

"Please, sit," Luke said, pulling a seat out for Stanley. "Kindness is a little busy talking to the others, but he'll be here soon. Before you speak to him, though, perhaps you could help us understand a few things first?"

"Of course. What do you wish to know?" Stanley replied. He did his best to find a comfortable position in his creaky chair. With the two there staring directly at him he found this a little difficult.

Stephen sat on a chair opposite, while Luke chose to sit on the table and place his feet on a chair. Luke's posture had a degree of threat to it that made Stanley lean away in reaction; not quite the way he wanted to react.

"First," Luke began, "how far into Isaac's tower did you and the rest of your team get?"

"Yes, and did you see how many soldiers he has?"

There was nothing Stanley could tell them, even if he wanted to. He had only seen a small part of his master's tower. All he could do was wing it, and hope he could feed them enough false information to keep them satisfied. Then when they had heard enough, he would slip away and tell his commander what he had learnt of the Sentients.

"Where should I begin?" Stanley said.

* * *

"What do you mean, they took her? Why would they take her?" Rhys' voice boomed throughout the control room of the basement. He aimed his words directly at one man, a man who should not have been there at all.

Where plans were made and meetings were once held, now only bloodied wounds and bandaged limbs were being seen to. Each and every surface in the basement's control room was taken up by the injured. Those who had been lucky enough to survive the attack at the restaurant were not so lucky now, as medical supplies were already running low. If not seen to in time, some were going to bleed out.

The arguing was only hindering efforts too.

Graham had his arms locked around Rhys' chest and tried his best to keep him there. Letting go would unleash a whole lot of anger into the room. "Rhys, come on, you need to calm down."

"How the fuck can I calm down knowing they have Phoenix? She's in danger and this dick knows where she is." Rhys wriggled in Graham's arms to get a good look at the man. "You're one of Conrad's men, so tell us where he took her."

The man stayed silent.

"Rhys, we'll find her, we will, but you need to chill out."

"Dammit, just tell us why Conrad took her?"

After so long without a single word from the man's mouth, he finally broke his silence to speak. "We didn't plan it. Conrad just reacted to the situation. Look, I don't know why. Do you really think I'd come here with you if I knew it was going to happen?" The man lowered his head and gripped his bandaged leg. He took a tight hold of it as he tried to stand. "Shit, it really stings."

"Good. I hope it fucking hurts bad, buddy. You deserve it."

Gregson pushed the man back, forcing him to rest against the console behind him again. "Your leg is badly lacerated..." She stopped and searched her memory for a name.

"Scott," the man said.

"Well, Scott, if we hadn't brought you back here you would have bled out by now. You owe us."

"I can't tell you where they are, I can't. I'm sorry. After what happened I'm still not sure I can trust you."

"You can't trust us? Are you kidding me?" Rhys shouted.

"You were the ones who called the meeting, you were the ones that invited an enemy spy, and it was you who placed everyone in Isaac's firing line. So yeah, I don't trust you. How do I know you won't just track my people down and kill them all?"

Jack, with his neck fully wrapped and his burns covered, was a welcome voice of reason. He sat in the corner of the room and, until then, had kept himself to himself. "He's right, Rhys." His voice was harsh and dry sounding as he fought against the pain to speak. "We'd all do the same in his position. None of us would give up the basement's location to someone we didn't know and trust."

Rhys managed to free one arm and aimed it straight at Scott. He had no intention of backing down. "If even one of them touches her, I'll kill you."

"No you won't," Graham chimed in with. "We're not going to start turning against each other like this. Isaac will

win if we do.”

Gregson kept her hand on Scott’s chest to keep him in place. The threat from Rhys had garnered a strained expression from him and another attempt to stand. “Listen, Rhys, they won’t have taken her to hurt her. There’s no point in that.”

“You don’t know,” Rhys snapped back at her.

“Think about it. If they wanted to kill her they would have done it there. They wouldn’t have taken her with them. It means they want something from her.”

“Like what? She doesn’t know any more than the rest of us.”

Scott winced again at the pain running through his leg as he spoke. “Conrad obviously thinks differently about that. He’s a good man—”

“Bullshit!” Rhys interrupted with.

“He is. He’s a cop. They don’t do anything without a good reason. Maybe you just don’t know this girl as well as you think.”

“Shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.”

“Yeah, go on then, try it.”

“Hey,” Gregson said suddenly. “Both of you need to shut the fuck up, or I’ll start bashing heads.” She roughly jabbed a Medi-pen into Scott’s leg to quiet him down.

“Don’t you dare tell me I don’t know her. I know her better than I’ve ever known anyone else in my entire life. I swear, if she’s...” Rhys turned away as his bottom lip twitched.

Graham felt the shudder from Rhys’ chest run right through him too. The anger was dissipating within the room as another much stronger emotion slowly took hold. Losing one of their own to another survivor group was playing havoc with them all.

“Graham, take him out of here for a minute. Let him calm down,” Gregson said.

This time Rhys was more cooperative and became easy to move. Graham pulled him back all the way to the door and then continued out onto the metal landing. For a short few beats of Rhys fluttering heart they remained close. Both were trying to keep their frustrations under control, and the more Rhys lost it the more he dragged Graham right down with him.

"I'm as angry as you are, Rhys. We all are. But going off like that will only make it harder for us to find her."

"I know. It's just I can't bear to think of her being harmed in any way. We've been so close these last few months. I can't lose her."

"We won't, I promise. If we want to get her back, though, then we'll need help. There's not going to be much time, so we have to work quickly. OK?"

Rhys nodded and looked through the control room window at Scott one last time. Clearly the anger had yet to leave his system completely. "Tell me you have a plan."

"Not so much a plan, just a favour to ask. Wait here, I'll be right back."

Taking three steps at a time, Graham made his way down the staircase and aimed for Captain Rigs standing among a group of his volunteers. They listened to every word he said like their lives depended on it - which at some point Graham expected they would. There was an obvious void where those who had not returned should have been. This had knocked their confidence greatly.

Graham gently tugged on the Captain's arm to get his attention.

"What is it, Mr. Denehey?"

The use of his surname made Graham back off a little; it had been far more formal than he had come to expect between them. Especially after what they had been through together only recently.

"It's about Phoenix. We know who has her."

"And who's that?"

"Well," Graham turned to the side and spoke quietly to keep it as much between them as possible. "For some reason she was taken by that Conrad guy at the meeting. One of their guys was injured, so we brought him back here to patch him up. He and few of our people say they saw Conrad take her."

Captain Rigs looked around his group before deciding to fully engage in Graham's conversation. "Excuse us for a minute." The group dispersed quickly and left them free to talk. "Go on."

"They dragged her out through a side exit. We need to get her back."

"Are you asking me to agree to a rescue mission?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know I can't do that, Mr. Denehey. We're only hours away from mounting the most crucial attack on Isaac's forces in this entire war. We can't afford to spare anyone right now. We lost a good portion of our volunteers during that last fight. If we don't have enough of these EMPs made by dawn, then we've already lost. The attack is due to start at midday."

"I appreciate that, but I would only need a few people to join me, and Rhys."

"To do what, search for her block by block?"

"If that's what it takes, yes."

"That's not going to happen. You'll all either be killed or captured if I let you wander around the streets looking for her."

"Let me take Gregson then. She can protect us while we're out there. All I'm asking for is the chance to find her."

"Absolutely not. We lost seven people at the meeting, I can't risk losing any more tonight. Tomorrow is too important."

"But we can't leave her with them. Surely you can spare a few people?"

Captain Rigs forcibly moved Graham to a side wall with one hand placed firmly on the back of the neck. He then continued to speak much quieter than before. "Listen to me very carefully, Graham. I need all the hands I can get to bring down these relays. With Conrad now ignoring our radio calls and Petra entirely out of the picture, it only leaves us and Brian's group at the fire station to hit them. I planned on having double the people I now have to work with. To maximise our attack, I've already had to drastically alter the plan. We're now aiming to take out only around forty percent of the new relays."

Hearing this shocked Graham. "Wait, will that be enough?"

"I can't promise it will be, no. Watts has calculated that we should be able to drop a large portion of the shield, enough at least to allow the Ring to take out the rest from above. It's a much bigger risk than if we had the people I needed. As it stands we should have enough EMPs, just not enough people to set them all off."

"Then we should try and get Phoenix back before it starts."

"No! I won't delay the attack."

"For fuck's sake. We can't just leave her there?"

"Keep your voice down, Graham. It won't be permanent. Look, as soon as the shield is down I can have them try and locate her for us. But I can't guarantee anything. Most of our resources will be needed to fight off Isaac's forces. Unless you can get a location from Conrad's man upstairs then I can't help you."

"He won't tell us anything."

"Then you have your answer already. Until the shield is down and we have the Ring at our disposal there's nothing we can do. She's just going to have to stick it out until we can get to her. This attack is too important to risk it all for one person. Thousands more are depending on us. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get at least four EMPs made by

morning. The group at the fire station have another two to make. That gives us a crack at six of the fifteen relays."

Captain Rigs stepped away before Graham could say any more. He then met up with a large team of people surrounded by the pieces to each EMP bomb. He immediately ordered them into an organised line, ready to be assigned roles and for the timeframe to be explained. They were running out of time to make enough, as evidenced by the slightly frantic nature of discussions going on when he arrived.

"So what now?"

Graham turned around, expecting to see Rhys there, but saw himself instead. Before answering back, he checked no-one was watching; he could do without others noticing him talking to himself in the corner. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked the copy of himself.

"We've been here all along, G. We didn't want to get in the way while you all talked."

"Fine, well, stay with me now."

"Sure, anything you want, mister," the child version of Graham said from half behind the other.

The third Graham stood to the side of them.

"With no way of finding Phoenix," Graham went on, "I guess we have no choice but to go ahead with the plan. After that we can go get her, and see to getting ourselves fixed too."

"Sounds good enough to me. I just hope Luke and the others will be ready when we send them the message tomorrow. You sure the Orb is the only way of reaching them?"

"I think so."

"Good. Then tomorrow we finally get to show Isaac what we're made of."

I wish I shared your enthusiasm, Graham thought. He gave a guilty look to Rhys, who stood leaning on the rails and watching him back. Without a word said between them

they had communicated, and the news was not good. Rhys placed his head in his hands shortly after receiving the unspoken message.

All they could hope for was that Phoenix would give her kidnappers every bit of what they deserved. They both knew she was more than capable of protecting herself. She would make it hard for them, possibly more than they realised. Conrad's people would have to treat her well to get what they needed in the end.

The question was, what did she have that they wanted?

Chapter 24

Time to think

After dragging her all the way from the restaurant, Phoenix's kidnappers had taken her on a night time walk through the streets, stopping only to evade the usual patrols. She had quickly given up on trying to escape. They were far stronger than her, and for some reason determined to take her some place.

With a small gash on the left side of her head she had barely any fight left in her at all. She still made it as difficult as she could by dragging her feet as much as possible. A few times they had even resorted to carrying her slight figure over their shoulder.

Once reaching the end of their journey they had entered a building and dumped her in the seat she now sat in. They had left her there for at least an hour already. She knew they were preparing their questions for her; she had been through enough of these types of interviews before to know how it all worked.

First they would avoid the direct route until she was begging to know exactly what they were talking about. After that they were surely going to list out what they knew about her, as a way of scaring her into talking. If none of that worked then they would turn nasty.

She was more ready for a fight than a discussion.

With a black hood over her head, she could still make out a little of her surroundings. She sat in a small room, lit only

by candlelight, with her hands chained together. A metal loop sticking out of a table in front of her kept her hands from leaving it in any way. There was barely enough chain to allow her to scratch her nose, let alone try and remove the hood. With one hand free she could make light work of the knot keeping the hood in place. With both she could tear it off and set about destroying the entire room, she felt so pissed off.

How could I have been so fucking stupid? she thought to herself. Haven't I been through this shit enough times already?

Every now and again she heard talking from outside her room. Most had been far enough away for her not to hear, but a few had not. She caught a stray word, here and there, and snippets of the odd sentence, enough to give her some clue as to her reason for being there. One woman had asked her male colleague about the 'terrorist' brought back from the meeting. She knew she had been cast in the role of the terrorist in this instance, which told her something important. These people somehow knew her from before, when she had still worked for Anthony.

The next conversation to occur outside her room was much closer than any other. When the rattle of keys in a lock joined it she knew she was about to have an interesting chat. Perhaps they would even give her a chance to explain herself properly. Although, only a tiny part of her believed that would be the case.

As the door swung in it sent a light rush of air Phoenix's way. Her hood fluttered in the small breeze, which ended as soon as the door was shut again. Now the interview could finally begin.

"Can we get on with this already? It's not that I don't enjoy a good kidnapping, I just really need to pee." Phoenix crossed her legs and shook her chains.

The other person in the room with her ignored it. She could hear the man open a folder and begin to filter

through the pages, one by one, in a deliberately slow fashion.

"Oh, come on, I can't go anywhere, can I?" she tried again. "I'll even keep the hood on if you want. Just don't expect me to clean up the mess afterwards."

The silence was working well. Phoenix could already feel herself becoming enraged by being ignored in this way. With the hood still over her eyes it left her mind free to conjure up an image of the person she talked to. In her mind this man was evil looking, with darkness in his eyes and a demonic smile upon broken lips.

"Are you going to say anything at all?"

"I'm reading," the man answered. He then turned over another page and slid it across the table to the others by his side. The whole table was his to make use of and he appeared to be making some kind of order of his paperwork. Through the hood Phoenix could only see that there were pages there.

The man continued to read for a few minutes longer. When he had finished and his paperwork had taken up the entire surface of the table in front of him, he addressed his prisoner. "It's nice to finally meet you, Phoenix."

She breathed in quickly as her name was said. Suddenly the face of evil she had imagined began to morph into everyone she had ever known. One by one she went through them all to find who it could possibly be. She certainly could not place the voice. But it was clear he had known about her before the shield went up.

"Who are you?" she said.

"Let me ask the questions here, OK?"

"Fine. You got it, buddy. Ask away."

A squeak from the man's chair as he stood made Phoenix lean back. She was ready to kick his knees as hard as she could manage, and hoped to follow with her own knee to his face soon after. Except he avoided her side entirely and went straight around the back. There he pulled the knot of

the hood loose and yanked it away from her face, leaving her struggling to find him in the gloomy light.

"There, that's better. Now we can talk properly," the man said as he stepped back around the table. He made a grunt as he lowered himself into his seat. Despite the broadness of his upper body he was much smaller in the chair than expected. His body appeared most comfortable while slouching. "So, Phoenix, do you know why you are here?"

"No idea. Who the fuck are you anyway? You're not the one who grabbed me. Where's that Conrad prick?"

"My name is Derek. Conrad is here too." The man tilted his head up to a camera in the top corner of the room.

"Oh, I get it, too scared to talk to me yourself," she said directly into the camera. "So, what's so important that you had to drag me all this way? Not enough women here for you?"

"This isn't a joke, Phoenix. This is very much a serious situation to be in."

"Fine, then what's it about then?"

"To put it bluntly, we know you're working for Isaac."

"Ok, see that's funny. You haven't got a fucking clue about me, have you? How can I be working for Isaac?"

Derek tapped his finger gently upon the table, on a picture he wanted her to see. It showed an aerial shot of a shopping complex. Along with her it featured the two of Anthony's men she had worked with on the day of Isaac's release. "Do you deny that is you in the picture?"

She knew it would come back to bite her at some point, just not so soon, and not right in the middle of a fight. "Obviously I don't. It's me. There's a lot about that day that people don't know. Yes, I worked for the man responsible for the terrorist attack, but I was tricked into helping. Apart from that photo, you can't have anything else that says I work for Isaac."

"What about this?" Derek pulled another photo out from underneath his paperwork and placed it on top of the other.

"Yeah, so?" Phoenix picked up the photo and gave it a quick look. It showed her walking through the street with Jack by her side. The angle of the picture told her it had come from a CCTV camera.

"Is it just a coincidence that this photo was taken on the day the shield went up over the city? On two occasions, when something terrible has happened to this city, you were spotted nearby. You've been involved almost from the beginning, haven't you? And what about these two?" Derek again produced more photo evidence, this time of two Simova technicians. "We know this man, Graham Denehey, is involved as well. Can you imagine our surprise to find you and this man working together again now? So, tell me, why did you and this man really call the meeting?"

"You know about Graham? Why didn't you kidnap him too then?"

"Conrad tried to, but he simply didn't have the man power. We weren't expecting to see two of the most wanted people in the country at that meeting. And when the rest of Isaac's forces arrived he had to escape quickly, so he grabbed you. So, the meeting?"

"The meeting was genuine, I promise. Despite what you believe about me and Graham, we are on your side."

"Care to explain?"

"There's a lot to it. Short version is that this fight against Isaac has been going on longer than you probably know. I worked for Anthony, who I found out too late was a nutter. He'd planned it all out to bring Isaac back. Simova never managed to shut him down, they lost him instead. I turned against Anthony and then found Graham and his people; they were being forced to help or their friend was going to die. That's why all of these pictures say we're involved, because we are, just not in the way you think."

"As for that second photo of me, I was in the city to help find Graham. His family thought he'd died when Isaac reformed, but he was trapped somewhere. I'm there in that

picture because I had no choice. Thinking I was here to help Isaac is so fucking wrong, it's fucking laughable."

"OK, so tell me this then, why would one of the police forces best detectives have been ordered to track you down on the day the shield formed?"

"I have no idea. Whose orders?"

Derek slid a piece of paper toward her, spinning it around for her to read. It was an official document with the seal of the Mayor's office at the top and a signature at the bottom.

The moment she saw it she read it aloud. "Mayor Jonathan Crawley. Why would he order it?"

"If not for a few things we've learnt about the Mayor recently, we would still be asking the same question. It's one thing to have your name at the top of a list of suspects, it's another entirely for it to be so important that the Mayor would want you found. There was a personal reason behind it, one we suspected would place you in the centre of it all. If you tell us what that reason might be and exactly what Isaac's plans are, then maybe we can work out some kind of deal for you?"

Phoenix sat back in her seat and stared up at the camera again. These people had nothing new to tell her. She could see no point in arguing back either, they were already certain she was their enemy.

"OK, then how about this supposed plan of yours?" Derek continued. "You say it's to bring down the new relays. We know that must be a lie, so what is Isaac's true aim? Is it a distraction, or a trap even?"

"It doesn't matter what I say, you'll just say I'm lying again. If you had any idea what's really going on, then you'd work with my people and help us fight Isaac. That shield is never coming down if we're screwing each other's plans up. Let me talk to my group and set up another meeting. That way we can sort this shit out. All this," Phoenix grabbed a

handful of Derek's paperwork and threw it back at him, "this is helping no-one."

"I didn't believe you would tell us the truth, neither did Conrad," Derek said. "Thankfully for us it doesn't matter right now anyway." He stood, began pulling all his paperwork together again and then placed the full folder under his arm.

The sign that he was about to leave made Phoenix rethink. Before he reached the door she called to him. "Hey, where are you going?"

Derek replied with a sidelong look. "If you won't talk now then it can wait until this shield is down. After that you and the other prisoner will be handed over to the proper authorities. I dare say they'll have a few tricks to getting you both talking. Lucky for you, those methods have never appealed to me."

"So what, you're just gonna leave me here?"

"Yes. Unless there's something useful you can tell me about Isaac's operation, you'll remain here." He then slammed the door shut behind himself.

"Hey, dickhead. Let me out of these fucking cuffs, right now." Phoenix yanked repeatedly at her chains. Frustration was quickly getting the better of her. She eventually gave up when her cuffs began to cut into her wrists. She slammed her back into the chair instead, which only creaked in return. "Fine, you wanna see something?"

No response came from the camera, as expected. Still she knew those watching the feed would be eager to talk after they saw what she had to show them. She leant forward, took a firm hold of the bloodied gauze stuck to the side of her face and pulled it off suddenly. To make absolutely sure they got her point, she turned her head to the side to give them a good look at the metal plate and thick wiring hidden beneath. It was the first time she had willingly shown it to anyone but Rhys or those she trusted.

It had the very effect on them she wanted. Derek and Conrad came bursting into the room, each holding a pistol and ready to aim straight at her.

"You're one of them, one of those mindless soldiers," Conrad said. His brown eyes were wide and bloodshot. To compose himself he passed his right hand over the chocolate coloured skin of his balding head and rubbed the short grey hair that had yet to fall out. "How can you sit there and tell us you're not working for Isaac? You're the same as his soldiers."

"No, I'm not. That's what I've been trying to tell you all. I'm a victim too." Phoenix turned her head away out of a sense of embarrassment. They were both staring at her like she had just transformed into some monstrous beast.

"She is different, Conrad. How many have we fought since this siege began?"

Conrad shot a look of surprise to Derek. "You can't really believe her, look at her head."

"Just hear me out." Derek lowered his gun to his side, where it hung comfortably. "Not one of the soldiers we have faced were even remotely human in nature. We know they're AIs inside human bodies, our other prisoner has told us that much at least. She doesn't seem like that to me. In fact, I suspect this is the same Phoenix in control as before."

"Even if that's true, she still can't be trusted."

"No, I agree."

Phoenix again rattled her chains. "So, any chance you can undo these? You know this isn't going the way you both expected. It doesn't add up, does it? Besides, the only one who can tell you why the Mayor wanted me found so badly is the Mayor. Everything else you have doesn't really prove anything more than I once worked for Anthony. Oh, and guess who killed Anthony in the end? Yep, me. The first chance I got I put a bullet in that motherfucker's head. Me, Graham and a few others all tried to stop Isaac reforming and nearly died in the process."

The two men had gone quiet while she spoke, no doubt trying their best to find fault in her explanation. She was happy to have thrown them both so suddenly. Now she could really prove to them how much of the truth they were missing. For all of their photo evidence and signed documents, it all amounted to a complex conspiracy theory, and nothing much more. The real story was far worse than either of them knew. The sooner they realised this the sooner she knew she would be back with her own again.

At least she assumed that to be the case.

"No, this is all made-up nonsense," Conrad said before reaching into his pocket with his spare hand. As he searched for something inside, he allowed his other hand to aim the gun wherever it wanted. He then produced a set of keys and began filtering through them.

"Conrad?" Derek asked.

"We know Isaac is planning something big. We know it's happening soon too. We don't have time to mess around. This interview is over. I think it's time she met the other prisoner."

Phoenix disliked the idea that she was to be taken somewhere else. She wriggled in her seat, tried to get a grip of her chains and prepared to fight back. One of those with her was going to find her less than cooperative when they were to attempt moving her.

"If you really are on our side then you'll find what he has to say really interesting." Conrad found the correct key and approached the table. He knew well enough to avoid getting within kicking distance of her. By leaning over the table he could undo the metal loop that kept her cuffs secured without issue. "Don't try anything, OK. Any violent act against us will only make it easier for us to decide if you're lying or not."

"I can't promise anything," Phoenix replied while rubbing her sore wrists.

Conrad unhooked her cuffs, keeping them gripped in his hands. He then began to lead her away from the table by pulling her along by her chains. "I'm taking her downstairs."

"I'll have Nessa and Jason meet you there," Derek said as he turned and walked away.

As Conrad walked Phoenix through the halls of the building she got a rough idea of the place she was in. The inside of any police station was the same to her, and she had seen far more than her fair share of them. This one appeared no different. If needed she felt confident she could find her way to an exit. That would have to wait for a while, though, she had decided. Part of her could not resist seeing what they had hidden downstairs.

They passed an open door at the end of a narrow hallway that looked into a conference room. Inside she saw people working on a large wall-mounted screen of some kind. There was power coming into the building, which allowed them to run a few complex systems. She knew it had to come from a back-up generator somewhere in the building; most police stations had them in case of emergency. It only appeared enough to operate a few key systems though. The rest of the rooms were without lighting of any kind and had to make do.

Down the stairs and through another set of corridors took them to where the other prisoner was being held. To Phoenix's surprise it was not one of the cells, but another meeting room.

"What's this?" she asked.

"This is where you'll be spending the next few weeks, until this is all over."

"Why not throw me into a cell instead? It's got to be more secure than this."

"The cells are where we sleep. You and your new friend don't get the luxury of a bed or a toilet." Conrad made

Phoenix stand to his side while he unlocked the door. He still had a firm grip of her chains, to her disappointment.

A petite girl with big brown eyes arrived, with a young looking man by her side. "Conrad, she'll need this."

"Good idea," Conrad replied, taking something from the girl. He then explained to Phoenix. "We found this in your pocket when we grabbed you. I assumed you'd taken it from one of Isaac's soldiers; never thought it would end up being yours."

"You want me to put this back on? Why?" Phoenix took the small black box and looked it over. They wanted her in disguise for some reason.

"Just do it, please. You'll understand soon enough."

As soon as the door was opened Phoenix found herself being forced inside with a strong hand on her back. Nothing had been done about her cuffs, they were staying on. When the door closed behind her she ran to it and slammed her shoulder into it, trying to push it open again. It hardly budged at all and certainly was not about to give in any way. She was trapped in a room again, with no idea who was in there with her.

This room, like most others, was lit by candle light alone. On the boarded up window frame at the end of the room sat a single candle that had less than an hour left in it, by her estimate. She doubted anyone would replace it in any hurry either. From the dried trail of cream-coloured wax down the wall beneath it she could tell the room had been left undisturbed for a while. Yet someone was lighting the candle each night.

"Hello?" she whispered into the dark corners of the room. Nobody answered her.

With a few cautious steps toward the candle she was then close enough to reach for it. After picking away a crust of old wax from the base she could finally move it. She picked it up with care so as not to accidentally blow it out and retraced her steps backwards to the door. Along the

way she caught sight of the other person in there with her. The stranger was bunched up in one of the corners and resting on his side, his face toward the wall and looking away from her. They had to be asleep, she determined with no certainty at all.

She checked the lock of the door with the little light she had available and snorted when it proved pointless. There was nothing she could do to break out of there. She was stuck for now.

Might as well get to know my new home then.

Avoiding the man sleeping in the corner, she sidestepped along the wall back to the window. Her intention was to attempt pulling at some of the wooden boards. Except before she got near to it she noticed something on the wall in front of her. As she used the straight line to navigate the room she saw the same thing scratched into the plaster, over and over again. It repeated as far as she could explore without approaching the man.

“One in twelve,” she murmured. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Chapter 25

Need to know

An hour of testing every feasible way out of the room had eventually ended in failure for Phoenix. Her prison buddy had not stirred during her exploration of the room, which either meant he was a deep sleeper or he was ignoring her. Either way the silence suited her. She had more important things to worry about than an unresponsive companion. Escape was still very much on her mind.

After that she had done the sensible thing and found somewhere to sleep.

Now, through the tiniest of gaps in the wooden boards, came a slither of morning sun. Dust danced in the pin's width of light like microscopic fish swimming through a sparkling pool. Only this one space let in anything from the world outside, the rest of the planks were nailed so close that not even a fingernail could find a gap between. No-one could have known there was any separation at all if not for the sunlight sneaking through it.

As the sun had slowly moved, its single finger of illumination within the room had as well. Where Phoenix had decided to sleep placed her directly in the path of the beam's arch. Eventually it had travelled across the room and to her face, where it focused its warm beam upon her skin.

The sensation disturbed her slumber and brought her back to the world, where she immediately set about

attacking an unseen foe. She swung her arms out a few times before she realised nothing had happened to threaten her. Leaning against the door had been as much to avoid anyone entering without her knowing as it had for any resemblance of comfort. It still took a few deep breaths to understand this.

She sat up and composed herself. The chains hanging between her handcuffs clunked as it hit the floor, reminding her not to try any complex movements. The last thing she wanted was to strangle herself while trying to stretch. So, for a second or two, she stayed still and silent. It was then that she heard a fast scraping noise in the room with her. A quick look around answered her question of what was making the sound; the man was now awake, and scratching a sharp looking stone against the wall.

"One in twelve," she said, reading the man's strange message. "Hey, what does that mean?"

The face that presented itself to her was filthy dirty and littered with red lines. Yet it was one she recognised instantly.

"You're the Mayor, aren't you?" She stood and approached, but the moment he saw her coming he backed into the far corner. "Hey, it's OK, I'm not going to hurt you." She decided to back off a little for fear of overwhelming him. "Why are you in here?"

Mayor Crawley ignored her question. He quickly returned to his message, which in the new day's light appeared to go right around the room. At the point of Phoenix's interruption, he had just started on the 'v' of twelve. With a readjusting of the stone in his hand, he restarted his scraping.

It was too much of a mystery for Phoenix to leave alone, though. She had to understand the meaning. "Mr. Mayor? Can you talk?"

"Of course I can," he replied. "You can drop your ridiculous impression of an ordinary person now, you're safe

in here."

"What do you mean?"

He turned to send a sharp look of disapproval her way. But the urge to continue scraping appeared to overcome him again. As he spoke he dug the stone deep into the plaster. "They aren't listening to what we say. The disguise isn't going to fool anyone anymore."

"Disguise?"

"Have you not realised? Everyone can see precisely what you are now." Mayor Crawley stopped and eyeballed her suddenly. "What happened to your black box? It looks loose. Did these fools try to tamper with it? They will be made to pay soon enough; Isaac will make sure of it."

Suddenly it fell into place for Phoenix. Everything Conrad and Derek had been talking about, all of the knowledge they appeared to have accumulated about Isaac's forces came from one person; the Mayor. She soon appreciated why he had been locked away for so long. The Mayor was one of Isaac's secret supporters.

Playing it safe still seemed the best course of action, so she chose her words with care. "Isaac will be disappointed in us," she said, doing her best impression of the few enemy Sentients she had met. The driller man, as she had called him shortly after having her own black box installed, had been a little more unhinged than she expected the rest were. By toning it down and becoming as emotionless as she could manage to be, she had high hopes for tricking the Mayor.

"Don't concern yourself with how the Master will react. We must both find a way out of this place and return to him as soon as possible. In fact," Mayor Crawley stopped mid scrape to face Phoenix again, his hand reddened and blistered by the repetitive nature of his message writing. "As your superior, I order you to sacrifice yourself so that I may escape. When the next person enters I want you to attack them and take them hostage."

"Yes, sir," she cringed as the 'sir' left her mouth. Showing her enemy any respect made her insides twist and turn with disgust. "Where will we go once we make it out?"

"Where else, but back to the loving embrace of our saviour? I have been away from him for too long, I need to return to him. My place as one of his most trusted will not remain open forever. I have to get back to him before someone else is granted my gift."

"Your gift? What gift is Isaac giving you?"

"One in twelve. I am one in twelve." Mayor Crawley's eyes widened and a smile slithered across his face.

"One in twelve," Phoenix whispered to herself as she tried to figure it out. "Is that like a probability or something? There's one in twelve chance of something happening?"

"No, no, no. I am one mind in twelve. One mind of twelve that is to be bestowed Isaac's final gift. I don't expect a mindless goon such as yourself would understand. Such things are above your Sentient consciousness to comprehend. I dare say the poor human trapped behind your feeble mind would grasp it, but you simply cannot. And that is the real problem with relying on so simple a mind. Alas, to guarantee his army could not turn against him he made sure you were all dumber than a bag of nuts." Mayor Crawley laughed to himself for a short while, then added, "Even after such a scathing insult you still stand there with that look of incomprehension across your stolen face. The least you can do for your, soon to be, commander is give your life to help me."

"What if the humans find a way of fighting back? What can Isaac do to stop them?"

"Fight back? Are you really *that* stupid?"

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just I've heard reports of a planned attack on the new relays. If they bring down the shield, will they have a chance of beating us?"

"The relays you say?" Again Mayor Crawley let out a laugh, only this time one with much more force than before. "We have nothing to worry about there."

"We don't?"

"Oh, no. It was always part of Isaac's plan. He has predicted every move the humans could possibly make. That they would concentrate solely on attacking the relays to bring down the shield was so obvious, I believe he had considered it the day he reformed. You see, our success has been preordained. There is no fight back, no way of defeating us. There is only one path to walk and absolutely no deviation is allowed. They can attack the relays until their heart's content, they're only following his model of events. It is quite impressive to see really. To be in league with such an unstoppable intellect is like holding hands with a God."

"So what will happen if they succeed? If Isaac always knew they would try, he must have something planned for them."

"The shield was only ever supposed to be up temporarily. We just needed enough time to build a large enough army to proceed with the plan. I believe the Master had predicted our enemy would eventually bring down the shield. Although his timeframe was somewhat different. If I remember correctly, then he expected the shield to fall around eight months after it went up." He stopped suddenly and began counting the messages on the wall. "One for each day I've been locked in here. It hasn't been eight months."

"No, the shield's been up for around three."

"That cannot be right. If the relays are destroyed now and the shield is brought down, then that would mean the next phase of Isaac's plan has already begun." He leant heavily against the wall behind him and dropped the stone to the ground. "He can't have started without me, he can't.

I should be one of The Twelve. Who could have replaced me?"

"Hey, what's wrong? What's the purpose of The Twelve?"

"That waxy-skinned bastard!" Mayor Crawley shouted, his eyes burning with rage and an angry mist of spit projecting from his mouth. The droplets settled in a matted clump in his beard. "I knew I could not trust him. Stanley Cartwright, you slimy little shit. You took my place, didn't you?"

"Sir, I need you to focus for me. What is The Twelve supposed to do when the shield is dropped?"

He snapped out of his enraged babbling when Phoenix touched his arm, unexpectedly causing him to withdraw again. "Never touch me. A drone may not touch a member of The Twelve. Do you understand? Never."

"OK, easy, easy, I'm sorry. I just want to know, that's all. I need to understand if I am to help you escape."

"Fine, if I must. But once you understand I expect you to get me out of here. The sooner I can return to Isaac the sooner I can stop that rat taking my place. He always was the jealous type. That was one of the reasons I liked him; he was easy to manipulate. But enough about that..."

Phoenix listened intently as the next part of Isaac's plan was explained to her. She was shocked in more ways than she cared to admit when the last of it reached her ears and shook the brain cells between them, like marbles in a bag.

It disturbed her greatly to hear how she and her tiny band of resistance had gotten it so badly wrong. They were placing every hope they had on the relay attack, and all in the hopes of allowing others from outside the shield to join their fight. The military had no chance of defeating Isaac when they were focused on what amounted to no more than a distraction.

"Holy shit, this is bad, this is really bad." She turned to the door behind her and began a frantic barrage of fists and legs to make as much noise as possible. She intended to

draw as many people to her cell as she could. There was so much she needed to discuss with them. But most of all she now had a message of her own to carve into the walls; the relay attack was only going to end in disaster.

She now understood precisely what was waiting just beyond that single moment the shield would drop. And worst of all, was the knowledge that Isaac would be sitting back and waiting for it all to happen. He did not need to lift a single finger; his enemy were bringing it on themselves. There was no fight coming, only a massacre.

Finally, someone approached the door and slammed a hand against it. "Shut the hell up in there," the man said.

"Hey, hey, listen to me. Get Conrad, get Derek, hell, get every fucking one. You need to get a message to my people, right fucking now."

Mayor Crawley gasped suddenly from behind her. "Wait, what is this? But the black box on your head, the glowing wire; you're one of mine."

"I'm far from one of yours, buddy," she replied with a hard boot to the door.

"How is this possible? No-one can have a black box installed and remain human. Who are you? How are you any different?"

She turned to look directly into his eyes. "You might be One in Twelve, but I'm One in Thousands, who all want to see you and your *Master* burn. How am I different? I'll tell you..." Before finishing she stepped toward the Mayor and landed a fist in his gut that forced a wheezing cough out of him. When he doubled over in pain she followed with a solid knee to his chin, knocking him out cold. She stood over him and smiled as a trickle of blood seeped out from between his lips. "Suck it up, prick!"

"What's going on in there?"

She recognised Conrad's voice instantly and ran for the door. "OK, I get it. This little scheme of yours worked really well. Now let me out. I need to use your radio."

"Do you think I'm simple or something? Why on Earth would I do that?"

"Because if you don't a lot of people are going to die."

The door lock opened and swung in to reveal a bemused Conrad standing there and staring at the body on the floor. "Didn't get along, huh?"

* * *

"Can I have everyone's attention please." Captain Rigs brought his hands together with the force of a thunder clap from above. It instantly gave him the focus of every person within the basement, including those still hard at work piecing together the EMP bombs.

One of those sat upon the floor and surrounded by scraps of wires and household ingredients for their pipe-bombs, was Graham. After a few failed attempts to sleep he had eventually accepted it was not to come and offered his help for most of the morning.

"I guess it's speech time again?" he said quietly. Of course it was never going to stay between only him. His internal collection of new voices was ever present, and still growing steadily.

The voice that replied this time was one he could not entirely confirm he had heard before. It still returned a comment back to him with the same ease of that of an old friend. "These military people do enjoy a good soap-box moment, don't they?"

Rather than engage with the extra voices in his head he had taken to ignoring them as much as he could. Lucky for him the first voice, the one he had come to appreciate was the more logical and reasonable of them all, always stepped in before it got too much. This time was no different. "OK, it's getting a little crowded in here, so anyone that has something to say can just keep it to themselves for now. And

under no circumstances show yourself to Graham while he is busy," it said as though the bouncer of a slightly unruly club.

Overnight, Graham had accumulated at least six new voices that would speak up at unexpected times, often to the detriment of his concentration. What he needed right then was something to distract them all, if only for a short while. He saw the Captain's speech as exactly the right thing to do that.

Captain Rigs continued. "In a little over three hours from now we will have sent a very clear message to our enemy. We will have removed the only thing keeping Isaac in control: his shield. Very soon he will know of his mistake in starting this war. He will see us for the real threat that we are. You will all have helped make this happen. You, the good people of New Chelmsford, will have dealt the first blow against him. You should all feel proud of that.

"Now, I know that some of you are nervous about the mission and worry it could go wrong in some way. I understand your concern. But there should be no room in your hearts or minds for doubt to take hold. Remember what your job is and do it to the best of your abilities, and you will see the other side of this fight. Yes, there will be losses, just keep in mind that the same is true of both sides."

He lowered his voice from almost a shout to a much softer level for the next part of his speech. "Look around yourself. What do you see? I see warriors, I see braveness and courage, beyond what you may realise. I have worked with some of the finest soldiers in the world in my time and it never ceases to amaze me what we are all capable of enduring.

"The very fact that any of you are still alive at all, under so overwhelming an enemy, is a testament of the true resilience of the human race. We will survive this as we have so many other dreadful events in the past. You, the

ordinary people of this great nation, will always prove to anyone that threatens our way of life that they will always lose.

"Think of the future after this day. What will you do? I'll tell you. You'll carry on. Life beyond this day will be ordinary, just like before. Isaac's legacy will be a swath of people that live a long and happy life in the face of all he has done. Because the best way, the only way, of truly defeating our enemies is to show them that they could not, and will never, change how we live our lives.

"But to reach that point we must travel an unknown road first, toward a destination that carries great risk to us all. It won't be easy, but it will be achievable. Even though our plans have changed and we are fewer in numbers than before, we can still do this. So, are you all with me?"

Most of the gathered crowd cheered and whistled in response. The Captain's speech had excited many of them, yet it had still failed to kick up as much of a frenzy as Graham suspected he wanted. The basement was not wholly made up of those of the same opinion. It had remained a house split in two. No speech could sway them all into volunteering, yet it appeared the Captain had at least tried his best. The rest of the crowd looked on with stern, unmoving faces.

"Watts, you're up." Captain Rigs stepped back and joined Gregson, while Watts took over.

"Yes, sir," Watts replied. He then began to read names from his handwritten list. When he had called them all he went ahead and organised them into groups. "These are the teams you will be in during the mission. Each team will be assigned a target relay. All of them must be hit at the same time, exactly at midday. Anyone who goes early or late will jeopardise the entire mission, so precision is crucial. Team one will be under Captain Rigs' command, team two will be led by Rhys and team three by me. Team four will be headed up by—"

"Me." Clement appeared from out of the control room wearing a multi-pocketed vest. The bulging pockets hinted of his intent to join in. In one hand he carried a handful of bullets, while in his other was an old style revolver. He confidently pushed each bullet into the cylinder until all six slots were filled, then flicked it into place. "You're not having all the fun without me."

"You? I thought you were against this plan," Captain Rigs replied in surprise.

"I told you, I'm not afraid of fighting. My reason for being against it was because of my duty to these people. I vowed to protect them at all cost. But I can't stop anyone else from fighting back, I realise that now. So if it's not too much to ask, I'd like to come along too."

Captain Rigs laughed out loud. "All right then. Team four is yours. Watts?"

"Thank you, sir. We have the EMPs ready to deploy and each team is made up of at least four people. I've marked the locations for each bomb on your maps. Time of attack has been agreed as midday. We will have two hours roughly to get each of these four EMP bombs set up at each location. Brian's group are preparing to do the same for another two of the relays.

"I've been informed that the range for the electromagnetic burst is no more than one hundred metres in any direction. So don't deviate from your instructions, otherwise you risk placing your device too far away from your target. Remember also to stay hidden at all times, even when the shield is down. Any enemy fighters caught in the blast will only be knocked out temporarily. They will reset within ten minutes, so keep your distance. Let the Ring gunners take them out before you break cover. Any questions?"

No-one asked a thing, the plan had been set out for them on a few occasions already. Graham for one appreciated the reminder, though. He had gone over it many times in his

own head, and had it discussed between each personality rattling about inside it too. They all agreed, it was the way to go.

"OK, then let's get ready. We leave in ten minutes." Captain Rigs again clapped his hands together hard to spur his people into action. He then walked through the middle of the crowd, with Gregson and Watts in tow.

When they neared him, Graham was beckoned to follow with a flick of a finger. He joined the line behind Watts and walked with them out into a clear area at the back of the basement. Here all of the equipment they were going to need was set up waiting to be taken.

Four large, metal tubes sat in a neat row. The EMP devices did not look to be too well put together, with a roughly straight seam where the two pieces of metal chute had been welded. Those making them had done their best to tuck wires into place and secure the pipe bombs inside, with varying degrees of success. Luckily for them, neatness was not required.

Graham stood before them. Every firearm they could muster was there too, including a few handguns, a collection of Taser pistols, and even a shotgun. They were choosing not to take everything with them; they had to leave a good amount behind for the safety of the basement.

"This is it, Graham," Captain Rigs began. "This is the end of the line for Isaac."

"I hope so."

"I know so. Are you ready?"

"I am, yes."

"Good, because getting you back to that Orb device is going to have to happen quickly. If you fall behind, you'll risk being left behind. I'm assigning Gregson to your mission. The two of you will send a signal to these friendly Sentients, when I give the order. That won't happen until the relays are dealt with, understood?"

"Yes."

"And about Phoenix; I promised to help you find her once the shield is down and I meant it. The minute I have comms with the Ring I will ask them to carry out a scan of the city. It shouldn't be hard to find her; I can't imagine there are many groups hiding out in police stations. Their heat signature will give them away quickly. As soon as we know where she is I will help you and Rhys get her back. You should let Rhys know before we leave, I want him totally committed to this plan, you too."

"You got it, and thank you, Captain." Graham made an attempt at a salute. Regardless of how inaccurate, he was thankful to see it had been appreciated.

He left the three of them talking among themselves and made an unbroken line toward Jack's work room - where Jack had been left to recover. The last time he had spoken to Rhys it had been a tense conversation. It had taken all of Graham's negotiating abilities to convince him not to go out on his own to find Phoenix. Graham had eventually brought him down from his enraged state. Since then Rhys had remained silent and found a nice quiet corner of the work room to rest in.

Only when Graham arrived, he found Rhys standing in the open doorway and smiling at him. "You OK?"

"More than OK. I'm ready for a fight. I'll rip this city apart before I lose Phoenix."

"Good. Just remember, we have to follow the Captain's plan first. There won't be a chance to get her out of there if that fails. Can you promise me you'll stick to the plan until then?"

"I'm not promising anything, Graham. You just worry about those voices in your head, and I'll worry about my side of things, OK? Besides, this won't be the first relay I've fucked over."

There was no point in Graham disagreeing, it was the most positive he had seen Rhys since Phoenix vanished. This version of Rhys was better than the deeply depressed or

angry one. Still, he saw a very real need to keep an eye on his friend, in case he did go off on a mad rampage all of a sudden. No-one wanted to see him killed for his lack of control.

There was already too much risk involved in the plan without that happening.

Chapter 26

Go time

At 10am the four teams left the safety of the basement and ventured out into the streets for the last time. Leaving their temporary home behind, they stepped into the light of day, a mass of nerves and jitteriness.

This was the first time most of them had seen anything above ground for weeks, and it shocked them to see the real state of their city. Those who had seen it were already accustomed to the depressing sight of piles of rubble and half standing buildings. The few supply runs they had been on had shown them the worst.

Once far enough away from the basement, the four teams split up and went their separate ways. Captain Rigs gave the leaders of each team his strictest orders yet; he made them promise to bring everyone back safely. These were orders he made sure none of them would dare defy, regardless of just how futile it may prove to be.

After that it was all down to each individual group to get their tasks done. There was no more help or advice from the Captain, they would have to rely on themselves to succeed. Radio silence had been agreed upon in advance, to avoid any of Isaac's forces eavesdropping on them from afar. It was now out of the Captain's control. His group would be just another otherwise innocuous cog, but together they would make an entire machine of destruction.

For Graham and Gregson, it was no longer about the relays, but about getting their message through to Luke and the others in the Sentient world. The fight was going to begin as one attack from both sides, and in each world too. So while the other groups went their separate ways, Gregson took point and led Graham away and toward the Orb device.

They stayed low, even dropped to the floor whenever the tell-tale whizz of overhead drones passed them by. Not one of the groups could afford to be spotted by these flying spy-bots or the plan would fail miserably. Graham was diving for cover at the slightest noise, to Gregson's frustration.

They were making good time, being just the two of them. Yet even so the pace was getting tough to maintain. If not a drone, then it was a random patrol strolling along the shattered streets instead. They were stopping and starting like they played a game of leapfrog. Doing this had delayed their progress enough that it had caused Gregson to repeatedly check the time on her Army issued watch.

"Pick up the pace, Graham," she ordered as she checked the coast was clear. "The others will be setting up their EMPs by now."

"Sorry. I'm not as fit as I used to be."

"Ha, you've never been fit!" one of the voices in Graham's head said. By now he had lost the ability to differentiate between the different personalities. There were just too many to keep track of.

For the next few blocks the route was relatively clear of obstructions. Within minutes they were again staring at the entrance to the library, checking the front for Sentients. To Gregson's disappointment there was another small team of them standing guard outside. Isaac was far from running out of soldiers.

"Damn. OK, here's the plan," Gregson said, while checking her rifle over. It clicked and beeped as it

confirmed readiness. She then took out a pistol, cocked it and handed it to Graham.

“Really?”

“Afraid so. Do exactly what I tell you, when I tell you, OK?”

Graham remained hiding around the corner at the end of the street and peered out across to the enemy. He was left alone and fretting over his poor aim. His last time with a gun had thrown bullets all over the place. Expecting anything different this time was beyond crazy, in his opinion. Still, as Gregson quietly ran to the building across the street, he took a few practise aims.

A moment later, once Gregson had disappeared up a staircase inside, he heard her voice speaking to him through their old-fashioned radios. “Graham, can you hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“Good. I’m heading to the outside emergency staircase, on the tenth floor.”

“OK, what do you need me to do?”

“When I say, fire a couple of shots toward those Sentients.”

“What, they’ll see me, won’t they?”

“Yes, that’s the idea. Just let off one or two shots and then get back into cover.” The sound of a door being forced open followed. Gregson then spoke quieter, and with a noticeable wind whipping at her mic too. “OK, do it now. And if you hesitate, I swear to God I’ll shoot you myself.”

There was no time for Graham to again pose his questions, he needed to act quickly. As instructed he stepped out from the corner of the building and fired three shots in the general direction of the library. As expected, the seven Sentient soldiers standing there and silently waiting immediately jumped into action and began running for Graham, their own weapons screaming a torrent of

metal abuse in reply. The bullets quickly took chunks off the wall beside him.

"I did it, now it's your turn," he called into his radio, his hands up by his head to protect from flying pieces of brick.

"You got it," Gregson replied. She then fired her own weapon, one that popped much louder, even from a distance. "One down ... two down ... three down..." she said in quick succession, each time accompanied by a metallic clunking sound as the next bullet was loaded. Unfortunately, by the time she reached six it was clear she had misjudged her timing a little. Soldier number seven had yet to realise another had been picking them off from a raised position, so assumed Graham to be the only threat still. "Fuck, no, no..."

"What's going on?"

"He's less than ten metres away from you, Graham. Use whatever you've got left in the pistol and floor that bastard."

"Why can't you—" was all Graham could say before the last remaining Sentient stormed around the corner and spotted him standing there, a finger in his ear.

The split second it took the Sentient to try and take aim was enough for Graham to act. Going against his better judgement, he grabbed the rifle and pushed it away as it fired. A single pull of the trigger sent a handful of hot metal slugs hurtling past and into the wall behind him. The two of them fought for ownership of the weapon, knowing the one that won would be the first to fire.

"Graham, what's happening? I can't see you." Gregson was clearly panicked.

He could barely breathe, let alone reply. The Sentient had more strength in reserve and soon began to overwhelm Graham's weakening grip. Three months in a coma had robbed his own reserve. At the point that he was sure he was about to let go of the rifle he turned to another tactic. To prevent the Sentient from taking aim, he forced all of his

weight forward and pushed his enemy away. "Gregson, now!" he yelled, before landing flat on his face.

A single shot rang out that stopped the Sentient finally. It had burst through the back of the head and out again through the right cheek bone, shattering it and any teeth caught in the way into tiny pieces. The body then slowly arched forward, slamming into the ground beside Graham, who stared in shock.

He remained there for a short while and allowed his chest to draw as much air as it needed to calm him down. After that he heard Gregson again talking to him through the radio.

"Nicely done," she said, as calmly as ever.

Nicely done, nicely done? She's got a fecking nerve! a voice bellowed within Graham's head.

Now they could enter the library, which Graham vowed not to leave again until every last one of the new relays was gone. He had seen all the fighting he wanted already.

* * *

The next forty minutes went by in a hurry for Graham as he and Gregson waited inside the library. They were eager to go ahead and send the signal to Luke through the Orb device. All that stopped them was the required command from Captain Rigs. That was not due until things were to become a little hectic.

Gregson was on one knee and resting against her upturned rifle as she surveyed the entrance to the library. There was no point in trying to secure the building because neither of them planned on staying for any longer than was absolutely necessary. So she stayed vigilant and free of distraction.

Until Graham's nerves dictated he talk, as they often did. From his position sat on the floor and with his back against

a bookshelf he had watched his companion with interest. While he twirled Susan's wrist screen in his hands he said: "Can I ask; why did you join the military?"

Before answering, Gregson first shot a look of exasperation back at him. "Really, you want to do this now?"

"Sorry, ignore that. I'm just going a little crazy waiting here like this."

They returned to silence shortly after. But the question had not been ignored. Gregson eventually sighed and then answered. "My family," she said.

"What?"

"I have three brothers. They all joined, following my father's insistence. It seemed like the obvious thing for me too."

"Do you like it, being a soldier I mean?"

"If you have to ask then you really don't get it. No-one stays in the military this long and goes through this kind of shit if they don't see it as their entire life. I wouldn't do anything else."

With the conversation having gone much deeper than Graham had been prepared for, it was with great relief that they were interrupted by a radio message. It was Captain Rigs finally.

"Gregson, do you read me. Come in."

"About time," Gregson huffed as she pulled the radio from her belt and spoke into it. "Go ahead, sir."

"Are you both in position?"

"We are, sir. Just give us the go ahead and we'll get the signal sent."

"Excellent. Each of the six teams are ready. We're less than ten minutes from detonation. As soon as you hear the noise get that message through. Comms will remain open from now on, so listen in."

"Affirmative, sir. We'll be ready."

The radio crackled as the conversation ended. Except instead of going entirely silent this time a low level chatter

could be heard between each team. They were all preparing their EMP devices to go off simultaneously. Now it was down to accurate timing alone.

"Here we go then." Gregson stood and readied her weapon once more. "Graham, you're up. Do that thing you did last time and let's get sorted. Any chance we can do it without that black mist shit again? I need to see to shoot anyone that stumbles in on us."

"Right. I'll see what I can do."

Graham approached the giant Orb as before and stood before its shimmering surface. *You guys ready for this?*

"Go for it, G," the oldest of the voices replied.

He placed his hand against the icy shell and prepared for a sharp pain across his body. It happened with the same ferocity as the last time, but was easier to stand now.

The diamond flashed rapidly. Seconds later and the Orb reacted, turning a deep shade of blue. It was going ahead much gentler than he had expected.

"OK," one of the voices in his head began. "We're back in. Just give us a minute or two to locate Luke again. If this is the same as before then this should be about right."

"Graham?" Gregson asked, concern written in creases across her face. "Is it working?"

All he could manage in reply was a quick jerk of his head to the side.

The voice continued to tell of its progress. "I think we've got it now, G. Just a few more..."

"Here we go then." Rhys could be heard saying through the radio. "Timer is set for one minute. There, that's it. Right, we need to be gone."

It was too late to back out now.

"Wait a minute." The older voice had obvious worry to its words as it spoke only to Graham.

What is it?

"I'm not sure. Give me a second or two."

Captain Rigs then whispered into the radio, his words only just audible over the occasional rattle of interference. "This is it then. Twenty seconds to go. We should see something happen the second the bombs go off. If not, then we need to be ready to run. I don't think Isaac will like this much."

Hey, what's taking so damn long. Have you found Luke yet or not?

"I don't know what's going on." The reply came with a tone of panic that Graham now shared with the many voices there with him. "Last time we reached him straight away."

They're probably a little busy getting themselves ready.

"I hope you're right. Because we're running out of time here."

The final count then began over the radio. The Captain called the numbers out. "Here we go. In five, four, three, two..."

"Oh my God," Graham heard inside his aching head.

"One!"

The sound of each blast thumping against the Earth boomed throughout the city centre, their combined energy causing the ground beneath their feet to shake violently. It sent a nearby gathering of pigeons off into a frenzy and flying in any and all direction. Shadows of the debris filled plumes then blocked out parts of the sky, stealing the purple light and struggling sunlight from the inside of the library.

"That ... was ... bloody ... awesome!" Rhys yelled over the comms system. "Look, the relay's fucked."

"Did it work?" one of the other teams asked.

"Only one way to find out." Captain Rigs answered back with. "Come in, this is Captain Rigs calling the Ring, come in please."

A loud fizz of static was soon followed by a voice that Graham instantly recognised. "My God, you're still alive? Captain Rigs, this is Brigadier Harrington speaking. Give us

an update, what's happening down there?" The voice came through loud and clear, cutting through the rest of them.

"Yes!" Gregson said to the side of Graham with a fist pump.

"No time for that now, sir." The Captain wasted no time and ordered his first strike. "Brigadier Harrington, you need to take out the larger relays in the city before the shield can reform."

"We're already coming around for a shot. Watch out below."

From high above, the Ring opened fire with a simultaneous attack on all of the newer relays. Graham listened in as the sounds of a swarm of missiles erupted out of it and quickly found their targets.

But a growing fear was robbing him of any enjoyment.

"Stand by for more targets," Captain Rigs told the Ring. "Gregson, send the message. Let's end this now."

"Gladly, sir." Gregson stood in front and focused on Graham's frozen face. "What's the hold up?"

"We're struggling to pass on the message, G," was the answer from one of Graham's internal voices. "We can't locate Luke or any of the others to give it to them. It's like they're not there anymore."

Graham breathed in sharply. *Shit, something's gone wrong. Without them this will all have been for nothing.*

Through obvious frustration, Gregson's face dropped suddenly. "Whatever is going on in that skull of yours get it sorted, now. I don't care what it takes, you have to get that signal sent."

To his dismay, the trouble only intensified a moment later when one of the volunteers shouted over the radio in a sudden panic. "There're soldiers coming up the street towards us."

"How many?" Captain Rigs yelled back.

"Too many to keep back."

"OK, I want each team to fall back. Find somewhere to hide and let the Ring deal with them. We've done what we can now. Gregson, the same goes for you and Graham. Once you're done find somewhere to wait."

"Fuck, there's got to be thousands of them," Rhys said.

"Hey, don't hang around there, you'll be wiped out. Brigadier Harrington, come in. We've got a large movement of enemy combatants marching through the city. I repeat, we are seeing..."

"We see them, Captain. It appears the enemy has been waiting for this fight." The reply was riddled with interference. "Just sit tight and let us..."

"Say again, sir, message was cut off. Sir? Come in. God dammit."

The next thing Graham heard was of something exploding high above them. This time the shockwave was much stronger. It flew past the library, shaking the structure to the core and kicking up every ounce of dust into the air. Graham choked on the particles invading his lungs with each breath.

That's it. Luke has to be there, so find him already.

At a distance of no more than a few hundred feet away came the flaming carcass of an enemy drone. It spiralled out of the sky before crashing on the roof of a nearby building. Amid the roar of its rotors came an ear-piercing shriek that continued well beyond the point of impact. Then closer this time came another, which found the ground a formidable foe, one it had no chance of surviving. The two demolished enemy crafts sparked and popped as the fires claimed them.

The older voice finally made the most obvious observation of their current situation. "Graham, Luke isn't there. None of them are anymore. There's nothing we can do."

"Yeah," another added, "we should get somewhere safe."

Fine, then, let me go.

The very second he was released, Graham ran for the front window of the library and stared up into the sky. He was in for a shock too. All across the sky were more of the drones than he had ever seen before, even more than during his near fatal deployment from the Ring. Isaac had been saving them all for another battle with the Ring's defences, it seemed. Everywhere he looked he could see enemy crafts whizzing about and passing by yet more of them. It was not the odd one of two, but what amounted to a swarm of hundreds.

What the Ring could manage to shoot out of the sky rained down upon the city below, amid a fiery orange glow. They fired a frenetic volley of rockets into the swarm from every weapon aboard. Small explosions began highlighting the dark clouds of smoke hovering high above. But what they missed was free to fly straight into them. Each drone that hit burst as it slammed into the sides of the Ring. The Ring defenders had no chance of fighting them all off and could only settle for slowing the onslaught down a little.

“Is it done, can we leave now?”

He struggled to find the right words to say in answer of Gregson’s question. The truth was the plan had just fallen to pieces like dried leaves in his hands. Without the same push against Isaac from the other Sentients there was no hope of defeating him. Now only survival remained. He shook his head with a forlorn look of regret.

“Don’t you dare, not now.” Gregson grabbed at Graham’s ballistic vest and dragged him back toward the Orb. “You’re going to try again, or so help me, I’ll beat you to death with my rifle.”

With everything going on at once, and with great volume too, neither of them noticed the flashing of Susan’s wrist screen as it hung from Graham’s arm. The old relays were now unblocked, and they were again free to send their data and power to the city’s devices. He had been proven right,

they had taken over as soon as the newer relays had been destroyed.

Gregson stopped suddenly. "Look," she said.

One quick glance at the screen and Graham was again brimming with nerves. The name across the screen had him ready to come out in a cold sweat.

It was Phoenix.

"Phoenix?" Graham shouted into the small screen.
"Thank God. Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. I've been trying to reach you. The old relays are working again."

"I know."

"Is Rhys with you, is he OK?"

"He led one of the teams. He should be hiding out somewhere. Where are you?"

"I'm still with Conrad's group. Listen to me, Graham. It's not what we thought. Things are not what they seem."

"We know. We're seeing the same from here." Graham wiped a smear of muck away from the screen to clear it. "Isaac has been waiting for this to happen. There's nothing we can do about it now, it's up to the military to fight him off. I can't even get a message to Luke anymore."

"No, Graham, that's not what I mean. Conrad's lot have the Mayor locked up. He was working for Isaac all along. He knows what Isaac's really up to. Putting up the shield was only to give him enough time to grow his army. But that's just one part of it. There's another side to it that's even worse. Have you heard of The Twelve?"

"The what?"

"They're the real threat here, Graham. The Twelve is the name he's given to a group of people he's turned into carriers of some kind of electronic virus. While we're supposed to be fighting his army, he's going to send them out."

"To where, the rest of the UK?"

"No, the world. Each member of The Twelve has the power to cripple the technology of an entire nation. Mayor Crawley was promised he would be one of them, but Isaac has to have chosen someone else. Graham, we have to stop The Twelve making it out of the city, otherwise we'll lose them forever."

"But Isaac has to be caught and stopped first. Luke should have started their attack in the Sentient world, except I can't reach him. If I can contact them then we could still hurt Isaac."

"No, Graham, you have to listen to me. Forget Isaac for now. Stopping these bastards is the priority."

"How can we stop them? There's no-one but us left. Everyone else is either fighting Isaac's army or in hiding."

"That's the thing. I know where The Twelve are. Get Captain Rigs to order a missile strike on the front entrance of the Mayor's tower. We're there now and there're too many soldiers to get past. This is where we end it, Graham. This is where we stop Isaac's plan. So get your ass here, right now."

Chapter 27

Face to face

The streets were filled with marching Sentients for most of Graham's rushed journey to the Mayor's tower. It was a daunting sight to see so many enemies out in the open. They had appeared in every part of the city centre, like an infestation crawling out through the cracks. The beat of their feet slapping the floor in perfect unison rang out all around. It was louder even than the aerial battle raging above.

Graham and Gregson passed the enormous ground swell of enemies in total silence, for fear of attracting unwanted attention. It was a disturbingly easy job to circumvent them all. Those inside the city appeared barely even worth the bullets anymore. Their real intent was the large military presence surrounding the city centre. Engaging with them would be exactly the spectacle Isaac needed to distract his enemy.

Once at the base of the Mayor's tower they stopped for a chance to catch their breath. They had run as fast as their tired legs could carry them in order to get there fast. It had also been in reaction to the very real possibility that they could become overwhelmed by Sentient fighters at any moment.

Getting away had taken them much further into the city centre.

Looking up the stone steps to the front of the tower, Graham could make out hints of what had been there at the start of the fighting. A wooden stage dipped forward on its broken supports. While waist-high barriers lined the front, in a large rectangular shape that took up the entire grassy area in front of the building. Someone had held a public event there before it all started and had never been given the chance to tidy up after.

But just before the spinning doors of the tower stood a row of heavily armed Sentients and two of the devastatingly powerful energy turrets. They guarded an area that hardly looked human at all anymore. As described by Clement, tall crystal spikes had broken through the ground that tilted away as though a warning to any attackers. Beside them were cavernous holes dug right through the ground. A few of the Sentients were around these too.

The sound of movement nearby brought Graham's attention toward an alleyway to the left of him. Out from between the buildings came Phoenix's small team, followed straight after by Conrad.

"Call the strike, Graham," Phoenix said as she took his hand and squeezed it tight.

"OK, here we go." He tapped the wrist screen and searched for the Ring's frequency, which it found refreshingly quickly. He then went ahead and spoke. "Brigadier Harrington, this is Graham Denehey, can you hear me?"

"Graham?" the Brigadier said, his voice dropping out every few seconds. "Are you with Captain Rigs?"

"No, sir. Look, there isn't time to explain. I need you to order a missile strike on the area just outside the Mayor's tower. I need to get inside but there're too many soldiers."

"We're a little busy right now, Mr. Denehey. I've got drones firing at me from all angles."

"I understand that, sir. Just one shot should clear them away. It's crucially important, I promise you."

The sound broke up temporarily as an explosion rang out behind the Brigadier. "Someone put that bloody fire out."

"Please."

"Fine. I'll see what I can do. Stay back for now."

"What's this about something called The Twelve?" Gregson was first to ask.

Phoenix chose to answer. "They're how Isaac plans on expanding his control to other parts of the world. This fight, between us and his army, is just a distraction."

"Son-of-a-bitch!"

The whistle from an approaching rocket made them all turn their heads to the busy sky above. As it raced down between the buildings it weaved its way around any obstructions. Then, as it hurtled toward the ground, its sound changed from a whine to an aggressive shriek. When it hit the front steps of the Mayor's tower it sent a mess of stone pieces and body parts flying all around.

It had cleared the area of guards in one bright eruption of flames and smoke. Now it was left for Graham and the others to storm in and clear out the remaining Sentients.

Conrad ordered his people as he followed. "Derek, you all need to protect the ground floor while we head to the top. When Isaac realises we're heading for him he'll send more soldiers. You need to hold them off."

"You heard the man. Let's set up a perimeter. Anyone who crosses the line will meet the combined force of our weapons and expertise," Derek shouted. "Nessa, Jason, see if you can contact that Ring platform. We might still need their help."

Within a short amount of time they had a strong line of men and women out the front of the building, ready to attack anyone that appeared unexpectedly.

"Graham, come on, we have to go now." Phoenix entered through the demolished double doors, joined then by Conrad and a bunch of his people.

Gregson then spoke to him. "Go Graham. I'll stay down here with the rest."

Graham had one last look at the impressive speed with which everyone moved and then ran inside the building. Through the shattered pieces of the glass double doors it led him a little way until opening up into a lobby area, with a reception desk immediately ahead of him and a row of lifts just beyond. It all surrounded the main attraction of the Mayor's tower; the enormous stone monument, which ran right up through the centre of the entire building, all the way to the tip. Each floor ceased just before the edge of it, the two separated only by waist-high glass walls and metal railings.

It had never existed before his trip into the Sentient world. Part of him still struggled to believe it was real. To him it had simply appeared in the centre of the city suddenly. In fact, it had been there already for nearly two years, years he had spent in an altogether different world.

Unfortunately, he had no time to really appreciate what an incredible building it was or marvel at how such a thing could be built so quickly. His gaze soon crossed over the many bodies lying about the place, including the woman receptionist slumped over the desk. Conrad's people had been the ones to kill them all as soon as they had entered.

"Let's go." Phoenix approached the lifts to test if they were working. To her shock and surprise one of them raced down to meet her as she reached to press the call button. The tower's systems were as happy to please as the rest of the city had once been. This one building appeared to have continued to work through the worst of it all. Of course they knew why now.

Graham joined her and was the first to enter the lift, to check it was safe for the rest of them. Behind him Phoenix stepped in, then Conrad, and two burly men in bullet proof vests. He pressed the button as soon as they were all inside and then watched as the ground floor flew away below

them at breakneck speed. The acceleration eased off a second later to relieve the pressure on their legs. Floor after floor zipped past them until each became just another blur.

"My people will clear out the lower floors while we're up here," Conrad said of the people they passed along the way.

Once near their destination floor it slowed gradually, then jolted as it found the very top. The doors swished open the instant it stopped. Each member of the group inside the lift raised a gun in expectation of a sudden firefight. But there was no-one there. The entire top floor appeared devoid of people.

Stepping out and taking the left side of the stone monument's tip to wander around, with his gun ready and aiming, Graham began to search for anyone there. The others did the same behind him. It only took them a short while to walk all the way around and meet up by a large set of wooden doors on the other side.

The whole floor was sealed and without any windows to look out of. Not that they needed to; they could still hear the frenzied attacks of the drones high up in the sky.

"OK, the minute we find The Twelve we shoot them all dead. No half measures here, understood?" Conrad wasted no more time and forced the doors open to begin exploring the room beyond. The two men with him stood guarding the entrance. He walked slowly inside, taking in every corner and aiming around for anything hiding there.

It was empty too, just like the rest of the floor.

At the end of the room was a desk, on a small raised section, and in front of an unbroken sheet of glass window. But before this was a long table with wooden chairs all around. In the centre of the table sat a metal box with wires coming out of it that trailed across the table and to each chair. Worryingly, there was a dried pool of blood at one of the table positions, but there was no body. There was no-one sitting in any of the seats at all.

The Twelve were not there.

"No, oh shit, we're too late," Phoenix said as she too entered the room and saw how empty it was.

"The Mayor lied to us." Conrad bashed his fists into the table. "That bastard lied to us."

"I don't think he did. Look at the table," Graham insisted. "They were here at some point. He didn't lie. We're just too late."

"Where the hell could they be then?" Phoenix picked up one of the cables and studied it. At the end it split into three smaller wires, each of which ended in a sharp needle-like implement. "They can't be outside the city yet, there hasn't been time. We just need to find them."

"How can we find them; we have no idea who they are?" Graham added.

"We have the name of one of them," Conrad said. "We know the Deputy Mayor, Stanley Cartwright, is one. But the rest are unknown."

As the others continued to discuss their situation in detail, Graham was interrupted mid thought by a mixture of the extra voices in his head. "We're not alone in here, G," they told him.

He urgently looked around the room, to each face there, and then to the one they had not arrived with. Standing behind the six-foot desk, with his back to the group as he looked ponderously out the window, was a dark figure; a silhouette against the bright sky beyond. He knew it was Isaac. "Everyone quiet," he ordered sharply. He then gestured silently to the presence on the other side of the room.

"Fuck, where did he come from?" Phoenix whispered. She had instinctively done the same as the rest of them and raised her weapon.

"Don't shoot," Graham said, "It won't do anything."

They took small steps in the direction of Isaac, each checking the person next to them for a cue on what to do.

None of them made it even halfway along the length of the table before Isaac spoke to them. Graham was at the front of them all, with Conrad creeping up on the other side of the table. They all stopped when the conversation began.

"I must say, I prefer the sky purple. This blue colour is just so ... cheerful. It's distracting, if anything." Isaac turned slowly to reveal his grey-skinned face and deeply recessed eyes. Over time he had worn away the image of Anthony he had chosen as his own and replaced it with something a whole lot more menacing to look at. Graham was convinced he was imitating some form of vampire, or general creature of the night.

When Isaac saw the people who had invaded his home he shot a smile directly at the one he recognised first, then a sigh when he saw the other. "So nice to be together again, don't you agree? Phoenix, Graham." He nodded to each in turn.

"What's going on, Isaac? Why are you here?" Graham asked, his words as confident as his solidly placed feet.

"I wanted to say hello. It isn't often that one gets to see his enemies before they die. I intend to savour this moment."

"Enjoy it while it lasts, asshole," Conrad said.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure. You are?"

Conrad stayed silent.

"It costs nothing to be polite, sir." Isaac's eyes stared intensely into Conrad's. After a second or two his gaze softened again and he returned to addressing Graham. "So, we're all here, now what's the plan? As I see it you have only a few choices available to you. Would you like to hear how this goes?"

Graham scowled as he answered. "You can talk all you want, Isaac, but this is the end for you."

"There is nothing you can do to stop me now. My army has emerged from the depths of this pitiful city and claimed every street and every building within it. They will walk the

length of this nation until it is all mine. I have over one-hundred-thousand soldiers under my control; that is a larger army than many nations. That you can stand here and tell *me* I've lost is beyond foolish. So why don't I save us all the time and trouble and tell you what's going to happen next?

"A short search of this floor will reveal to you how I am able to pass between worlds. The two men outside the room should have by now noticed the small Orb device attached to the tip of the stone monument. They will be investigating as we speak. In fact..."

"Sir, we've found something odd out here," one of Conrad's men called out.

"There we go," Isaac added with a proud smile across his face.

Everyone was shocked by the perfectly predicted interruption, not least Conrad who reacted more verbally than the rest. "What... how the hell did he know?" he said before taking a couple of steps away and asking his men to explain.

"Come now, why don't you share with the rest of the group." When no more came from Conrad's men, Isaac appeared to become impatient. "Fine, then allow me. This entire building was created for me. It has always been for me. A place such as this is only befitting of a ruler, not a simple Mayor. The device attached to the stone monument is connected to what hides inside it; I created a crystal tower, just as your beloved Sentients did back at Sanctuary. I not only tunnelled my way into the city from the prison you made for me there, I also made this building to serve me too."

"Jesus," Graham said.

"Oh, please don't try to flatter me, Graham. Besides, I could never be secondary to anyone, or anything, even one of your species' many deities. I am, simply put, better than that." Isaac walked around the desk to then lean casually

against it with his hands together and resting on his lap. "Now, I'll admit I was a little surprised to find you here, Graham. Since I was almost certain you had perished by now. Even so, the outcome remains as I predicted. And the next choice is one I do so enjoy watching play out."

"What are you talking about? How can you have seen this before?" Graham said, finding only fault in Isaac's logic.

"It is the first time this has happened in *your* world. But in the Sentient world, this has occurred many times before. Every possible version has already happened for me, inside my simulations. So you see, the future is not an unknown element to me. I have seen almost every conceivable outcome and have adapted, even moulded it to end the way I wanted. That is how I can tell you this will only end badly for you all."

"Bullshit! There's always things you can't predict." Graham took a step toward Isaac as the anger boiled up inside.

"Please, Graham, do not be so limited in your thinking. Your reaction is always the same, in every version of this. First you get angry, then you become despondent, until coming full circle again. Let's just move ahead of that, shall we. I for one have seen it all too many times before."

"Now, the next part is interesting. You can see by the empty chairs at my table that you are too late to stop The Twelve from leaving the city. And in that there is no deviation. It is usually Phoenix who by now realises what the metal box on the table is for. So, Phoenix, care to tell us what you think?"

Shock raced across Phoenix's body, causing her to do what Graham had never seen her do before; she shrank into herself, deflated even. She then began to look over the black box and form the opinion Isaac had known was coming. "I guess these wires went directly into the back of each member of The Twelve. They were connected directly

to your network. That's how you were able to upload the virus to their minds," she said.

Isaac gave a 'sort of' gesture to her in reply. "So close. You miss the obvious more times than not. The Twelve haven't been infected with some kind of electronic virus, their minds *are* the virus. I have granted them the gift of ultimate freedom. They are no longer shackled to their feeble human shells."

"Holy crap, that must be what I saw coming out of the first relay we destroyed."

"Indeed."

"No. That's not possible," Graham blurted out. He was sure he had found something wrong with it all.

"Is it not? Let me explain it to you then. The Twelve possess an ability no other human has ever possessed before - at least on my side of things, hey, Graham." The wink Isaac sent Graham's way made the others all turn to face their confused friend. "Their minds can operate independently of their bodies. I have freed them from the burden of fragility. They are now immortal beings.

"For now, they are contained within their bodies again. Then, when they reach their destinations, they will leave them behind. They will roam free throughout the rest of the world's technology, causing havoc and disruption to all. Their ultimate aim will be to cripple each nation, ready for my ground forces to invade and take control. This, my friends, is the real end. You will all either die here, or sometime later. But you will always fail to stop me."

"Even if you have it all thought out, you can't stop us from trying," Phoenix said.

"Oh I fully expect you all to fight back. Which is where I am afraid things always go wrong for you."

Graham had something on his mind all of a sudden. He rapidly considered the point of Isaac's explanation aimed at him earlier. What was he talking about?

"Graham," the older of the voices said to him. "He means how our mind was inside the Sentient world, separate from our body. He knows we were there."

"How did you know I was in the Sentient world?" Graham asked suddenly.

Isaac stopped mid-sentence to answer him. "You fought against my forces. I see everything they do. I saw you with those Sentient freaks, and watched you protecting them from me. You succeeded in that endeavour, for a while at least."

"For a while? What did you do? Tell me what you've done." Graham bounced up the single step to be right next to Isaac, so close that he could see the flicker of the holographic image standing there before him.

"Oh, you mean what did I do to your Sentient friends. You call one of them Luke, don't you? Pathetic! They are not pets, Graham."

"Tell me what you've done with them."

"No, no, no. That isn't how this goes. You'll have to see for yourself." Isaac stood straight and raised his chin up high. "And that is where we must end it for now. It is time you made a decision."

"Don't listen to him, Graham," Phoenix told him.

"Please, hush, this is important." Isaac stepped around Graham to the other side of the table, where he sat. "Now, when I return to the Sentient world, you will have a choice. You can either leave this place and try to survive the rest of the war, with your family by your side. Or you can follow me and give up any chance you have of seeing them again."

"I can tell you that, even after my warning, your past decisions have tended toward following me, with an overwhelming probability of seventy-eight percent that you will again. Of course, that will have changed now that I have told you all of this."

Graham already knew which it was going to be. Despite how torn he really felt inside, he had only one option to go

with; he was going to fight until his last breath. "I won't let you get away this time," he said.

"So, my predictions are proven correct yet again. Just know this, Graham Denehey, that ninety-nine percent of the time you die when you enter the Sentient world after me." Isaac stood and bowed as he finished. "And with that I shall bid you all a fond farewell. The next time I see you, Graham, it will be the last."

Isaac's image faded away to leave the room in complete silence. Everyone stood motionless and staring blankly ahead in shock. Their first encounter with Isaac in over a year and a half had ended much quicker than any of them expected. He had arrived out of nowhere, gone on to tell them their thoughts and explained their every option, then left just as quickly.

"You're not really considering going after him, are you?" Conrad asked.

Graham could only stare at the spot where Isaac had been for the time being. An angry storm of vitriol swirled within his troubled mind. Not only was *he* raging about what he had seen, but every other voice inside his head was too. It quickly became too much for his mind to sieve through. All of the noise built into one enormous screaming match, like an entire stadium of people were yelling at the top of their voices, all contained within his skull.

After a while it was all he could hear. Even Phoenix seemingly shouting straight at him could not break through it all. She grabbed his shoulders and began to shake him roughly into responding. In the end, all he could do to stop his head from exploding was to join in with the other voices in his head.

He yelled out repeatedly until the other sounds began to calm down again. There had to be thousands of voices in there now, so many more than he knew how to cope with. Yet each and every one of them understood that their angry cries had to stop. It had taken the contents of Graham's

lungs to bring them to an end, with one massive boom of his own voice.

"What's wrong? Graham. Please, talk to me," Phoenix continued to plead with him. "Tell me what's going on."

"It's the voices, they're too much, I can't..." His voice stuttered as the ordeal got the better of him. In that moment he realised he was still following Isaac's predictions, and it made him descend further into his sudden pit of despair. He had almost fallen apart in exactly the way Isaac had said.

"We should go," Conrad said.

"I can't do that." Graham objected. "My family is waiting for me. They're in the path of Isaac's army now."

"You can't get out of the city while this is going on. What else can we do now, but hide?"

"I can finish this tonight, once and for all." Graham stood straight, his back forming a solid line and his fists clenched tight. "Hook me up, I'm going after Isaac."

Phoenix picked up two of the cables and again studied the needle-like ends. She checked both looked the same and then set about offering one to Graham. The other she kept in her hand.

"I only need one," Graham said.

Phoenix looked nervously toward him. "The other is for me."

"What? No way, you can't. Rhys would never agree to that."

"If you two are going, then so am I," Conrad said, picking up a wire of his own. "I'm too old to hide from anyone these days."

"If Isaac knows we're going to do this then it means it's easy to figure out." Phoenix raised the wire up to the back of her head and held it there, waiting for anything to happen. To everyone's surprise the three wires went for the back of her head like three tiny pissed off snakes. The

needles pierced the base of her skull and she immediately fell silent, her eyes open wide and staring at nothing.

"Shit." Conrad then followed her lead and did the same. He winced as the three needled ends shot out like darts and entered the back of his head too.

Graham gave one last look to Isaac's desk before he joined them. The world then disappeared for him the second he felt each needle puncture his skin and then continue up into his brain. A sharp pain as strong as a bullet through his head followed, but was gone almost immediately afterwards.

All he needed to do now was open his eyes and see what was there.

Chapter 28

End game – part one

When Graham finally decided it was safe to open his eyes again, he did so slowly and found a whole new world in place of the other. He had been inside the Sentient world before, but never in the part of it he now stood. He saw no darkened landscape stretching far away, or any odd pathways and strange floating doors like his previous visit contained. Instead he had arrived in an enormous central chamber, like he had stepped inside a gothic cathedral.

Tall archways hung high above his head that appeared made of wood hundreds of years old. It was black too, as though it had all seen a fire at some point in its history. All along the ceiling were complex patterns carved into the wooden beams that only added to the atmosphere of dread surrounding him.

He turned to see the others there too. They searched the dark spots of the ceiling for anything residing within. It was only when Graham followed a few of their gazes that he realised the walls were moving. The same patterns on the beams above repeated across these too. Up close he could see what he had missed before. It appeared a writhing mass of bodies, all crawling over each other and spying the four humans inside the room.

"This is seriously messed up," Phoenix said, being the first to break the silence. In here her slightly Emo appearance appeared almost at home.

"What do you think they are?" Conrad added as he wandered close to a wall and leant toward it to see better.

"Don't you recognise them, Graham?" A deep demonic voice spoke to them from a black void at the furthest wall of the room. The power behind the unseen presence's voice caused the ground to shake beneath them.

"Isaac, is that you?" Graham called back.

"Do you recognise them?" The voice became like a deep rumble as it echoed around the huge room.

Graham felt a surge of fear pop into place in the centre of his mind as he considered the forms all intermingling and distorting within the wall - what had appeared a solid structure of wood a moment earlier. Most were featureless and only outlines of faces, with nothing to tell them apart at all. Yet the more he looked the more he expected that to change. When the first that he recognised bubbled up through the rest of the bodies he leapt back and gasped. "Oh my god. What have you done to them?" he shouted as he locked eyes with the face he had seen.

"No," Phoenix whispered as she too spotted a face she had seen before. "Luke. Jesus Christ."

Again the voice spoke to them as though it belonged to a giant hiding behind the darkness. "They are mine, now. I have defeated the last of the Sentient plague. This place belongs to me and only me. Soon the same will happen in your world too. I will not rest until every human is either dead or under my control. Those who stand against me will perish, as your friends here soon will."

"You bastard." Phoenix this time raised her voice as much as she could to vent her anger.

"That's why I couldn't reach Luke and the others, they were under attack too," Graham said, speaking to himself. He then returned to speaking to the unseen form at the back of the room. "Damn you, they were safe. How did you get inside the puzzle maze?"

"That would be down to me."

Everyone turned to find the person who had appeared behind them unexpectedly. The man standing there was one Graham did not know. Conrad, on the other hand, definitely knew him.

"So it's true, you really were working for Isaac all along," Conrad said.

The man gave a disturbing smile in reply.

"Who is he, Conrad?" Graham asked.

"My name is Stanley Cartwright. I was the Deputy Mayor, until Conrad here decided to kidnap the Mayor, and that forced my promotion. To answer your other question, Mr. Denehey, I was the one who brought down the puzzle maze, as you call it. Your Sentient friends took me in like a sick puppy and nursed me back to health. I waited until they turned their backs and then let in Isaac's beasts. I've been informed that you've already seen the spiky monstrosities before, Graham. Very scary things indeed. Anyway, your friends were torn limb from limb while they begged to be spared."

"There were families in there, real families. You don't know what you've done."

"We've won, simple as that."

"You haven't won anything yet, you fuckers," Phoenix yelled.

"Enough!" The booming voice of Isaac silenced them all. It carried with it enough force to again rattle the foundations of the room. "Why do you still choose to come here when I have told you how it must end? Are you so consumed by hate that it has clouded your judgement? Or do you still cling to hope?"

"I've fought your creatures off before and I can do it again. Or have you forgotten about the last time?" Graham returned with.

Isaac let out a deep and throaty laugh that vibrated through the walls and the floor like a fleet of tanks rolling by. "That was against only a few. I have many more than you could ever defeat now. Perhaps you would like to see?"

From the arches above their heads came the sound of cracking wood and splintering beams. Bits began to fall from the ceiling and land heavily onto the floor as an army of glowing creatures broke their way inside the room. They tore away the roof with their sword-like appendages, each

as vicious as the next, and exposing a thunderous sky above.

"When you have defeated my army, what will you do then? Do you hope to fight me too?" Isaac said. His question was followed by an earth-shaking thud, then another shortly after. Slowly the black void that had hidden him so far began to retreat all the way to the back of the room. Where Isaac had spoken from could now be seen fully.

"Oh my god. We can't fight that, Graham." Phoenix pulled on Graham's arm to move him back.

Sitting in a throne the size of a ten storey building was Isaac, his face as dark and devoid of colour as before. Within the Sentient world he had grown to such a scale that he appeared a giant in comparison to the others there with him. All around his bloated form came a collection of enormous Kraken-sized tentacles that fluttered and swiped at the air. They appeared incomplete, like a hologram with missing pixels. "Now you see my true form. Do you still believe you have any chance against me?" he said.

One of the glowing creatures crawled down Isaac's rightmost tentacle, all the way to the floor, and landing with a crunch as the ground collapsed slightly beneath it. Without taking the time to even aim, Graham threw a bolt of energy from out of his fingertips that exploded the creature upon impact, sending pieces of it flying in all directions.

"Bloody hell," Conrad called out as a piece passed him by. "How on Earth did you do that?"

"So," Isaac began. "You still remember how to fight in this world."

Graham kept his arms spread wide apart and waving around as a warning to the rest of the creatures skulking around the area above them. "After I helped get Luke and his people to safety they taught me a few tricks. Feel free to check them out."

"Oh, I intend to."

The second Isaac finished speaking the remaining creatures leapt from their hiding spots and landed in a neat row between him and Graham's group. Then more followed, and even more, until an entire battalion of enemies had appeared.

"Graham, we can't help you, we don't have the abilities you do," Phoenix said.

"I've got this," Graham replied before instigating a fight with the first row of creatures. He fired a volley of bolts into a few of them, instantly smashing them into glassy pieces upon the dark ground. He then took aim at the rest and dealt them all fatal blows in quick succession. The first row now lay in tatters and thousands of bits all around.

"Impressive," the deep voice of Isaac said from his giant throne. "You wield your anger well, Graham."

The second row of creatures changed their tactics and split up into separate groups. They moved rapidly as they approached Graham, not taking a single second more than they absolutely needed to reach him. After a few had been blasted to nothing but dust and grit, the rest were soon upon him.

Graham was dealt a deep cut across his side that lit up the immediate area with bright light. He looked down at the wound and was amazed to see it glowing like the inside of a Sentient. After taking a hit, he staggered back a few steps before he regained his balance. When he spotted a group of four of the creatures racing toward him again he sent out another attack of energy bolts, bringing them all crashing to the floor.

He had beaten only two rows of the creatures and still there were more than ten rows remaining. The deep gash in his side told him how difficult it was going to be to win. There were just too many of them to defeat. He had already taken a hit that was serious enough to bring most people to their knees.

"Graham," Phoenix screamed. If not for Conrad holding her back she would have run to him.

Graham held up his hand. "Wait," he shouted, his other hand tight against his side.

The enemy stopped in place upon Isaac's silent command. "What is it? Are you ready to admit defeat?"

"Fine. You have me already. Let the others go. They don't need to die here as well."

"What are you doing, Graham?" Conrad said.

Isaac leant back in his chair. "Even in the face of certain death you humans will think of others. It is one of many weaknesses you have. No, after I have destroyed you I will do the same to them. They will be cut down by your side. I will allow you something else, however."

The nearest wall to Phoenix and Conrad turned from a solid piece of wood to a rippling puddle. Bodies floated up to the surface like bloated cadavers in stagnant water and then were gone. Only one remained, contained within the small waves. This last figure emerged alone, and was allowed to fall to the floor a moment later.

"Luke, oh my god. Are you OK?" Phoenix raced over and wrapped her arms around him.

"There," Isaac interrupted. "Now is the time to say your goodbyes."

Luke was too weak to hold himself up as he spoke. "What are you doing here? You have to leave, it isn't safe."

"Don't worry, Luke. We're here to help."

"Please, you have to save the others. There are still some of us left, back at the puzzle maze." He turned to face Isaac as he continued. "You've killed almost all of my people already. Please, spare the rest. We are no threat to you any longer. Just let us all leave this place."

"While even one of you is still alive, I will never stop. These worlds are mine now."

Phoenix held Luke tight in her arms.

Seeing the two of them holding each other close, a human and a Sentient together, made Graham decide what should happen next. He had faced the same choice once before. Back at Sanctuary he had chosen to stay behind and fight, all to give his family the chance to escape. He saw the same happening again. If he stayed behind and fought them off for as long as he could, then maybe the others could get away still. "Go, now, all of you," he said. "Save your people, Luke. Get them out of here."

"Thank you, Graham."

"You can't take them all on by yourself, that's crazy." It was Conrad who shot this back at Graham first. The others were just too slow to say it before him.

"I've made my mind up. Go."

Phoenix dragged Luke to his feet and made for an enormous door at the end of the room. As she did so she looked to Graham for the final confirmation that he was to stay. She got it, and with an expectant smile too. With reluctance, Conrad followed soon after, leaving Graham alone.

"Well, this has been fun and all, but I really need to be getting on with things," Stanley said. He then faded away into thin air a moment later. It was a sign that the fighting was about to intensify once again.

Isaac then spoke. "I agree. I am growing tired of this. What do you say, Graham Denehey, shall we finish this?"

"Your move."

"Excellent," Isaac growled. "Kill him now," he then ordered of his army of glowing creatures.

Every one of the spiky monstrosities burst forward and began to run toward Graham. He reacted instantly by throwing up an energy bubble that quickly surrounded his huddled form. As expected, he was immediately set upon by the enemy, which smashed against his protective shield, one after the other. They acted through violent intent alone.

This was it, the last fight had finally begun. Yet it was taking all of his strength to maintain the force-field. Just as it had during his and the Sentients' escape to the prison maze before.

"Graham, I'm begging you, we have to get out of here, before it's too late," one of the voices in his head said to him.

"No. Not yet—" Graham was cut off by another voice he assumed had only spoken inside his own mind. It was the younger, more aggressive of the extra voices he had lived with for so long. Except the voices were more immediate now, somehow more present than usual.

He soon realised why.

"Then let us help instead, G," it said as it took the left side of Graham and began to reinforce the shield.

"What's going on? How are you..." Graham tried to ask.

Isaac's creatures suddenly stopped at no more than a distance of ten or so metres. They hovered in a perfect line, seemingly hesitant to step closer.

"What is this?" Isaac roared.

To Graham's other side came another version of himself. This time the older of them all, the one he had lived with the longest. "If there's one thing we know how to do, G, it's how to survive inside the Sentient world. Stephen did the same when his mind split in two. Don't you remember? What did the part of Stephen that was trapped in here do?"

The answer came to Graham in a hot flash that washed over his body suddenly. He smiled as he shared it with the rest of them. "He used Sentient code to fill in the gaps," he said.

"Exactly, G. Well, guess what? We did the same thing. Each of us is now a fully independent being."

"Yep, and that's not all, mister," the child version of Graham said standing just behind. He walked up to the original Graham and took his other hand. "There's loads of us now too."

"Loads? How is that possible?"

The older Graham continued. "Funny thing is, that thing Luke and the others did to you, which accidentally caused your mind to fracture and us to form, it was passed down to us too. Joining your human mind with Sentient code caused a corruption in both."

This time it was a version of Graham that he had never seen before. It was him but not quite correct, like it was only a rough approximation. It continued to explain it in Graham's exact voice of today. "Yep, that means something a little weird is about to happen," it said.

Together, they dropped the energy bubble and stood firmly in place.

"What?"

The answer came in the form of a strange stutter from each of the new Grahams there. Their heads bent back and faced the ceiling as their bodies shook amid a ripple of energy that passed straight through them. The result was the sudden and wholly unexpected formation of another batch of Grahams, each a little different from the next.

"No, this cannot be. You are corrupted!" Isaac said, his voice deep but a little softer than before. He stood and extended his finger out toward Graham's group. "Destroy them all," he bellowed before running for the black void behind him. When his giant form met the blackness he vanished entirely. His army of glowing creatures then set about carrying out his orders.

"Here we go," one of the other Grahams said. "You may wanna step back a little."

Graham did as he was told and stepped all the way to the rear wall, where he watched as a wave of fighters, all identical to him, yelled out a battle cry and burst forward toward the enemy. The moment his doppelgängers met the combined force of Isaac's army they began to tear through them. Each strike was joined by a bright flash of light as their energy ignited the battlefield.

Both sides appeared almost equally matched in ferocity, but only one had the numbers; Isaac's soldiers. To beat them all it would require even more of Graham's copies to succeed. That was not the case for long as more emerged suddenly from the last batch. The process was happening every few minutes or so, regardless of how the fight was progressing. And it showed no sign of stopping either. In response, yet more of Isaac's creatures crawled out of the woodwork to join in.

All that Graham cared about in that moment was the fate of Isaac. He could see the strange black-hole like void was still there at the back of the room. More importantly, he knew it was still open for anyone else to enter through. This was the chance he had been waiting for, the one thing he had never known would happen, but had hoped for more than anything else in his life; he would get a chance to fight Isaac alone.

"Hey," he called to the nearest of his clones as it ripped an enemy in two with its bare hands. "Hey, can you get me to that portal thing at the end of the room?"

The other version of him gave a look toward the black void and smiled back. "No problem, follow me," it replied before firing a stream of energy into the enemies ahead of him. When he had made enough space for him and Graham to run through, he called out to the others around him. "We need to get G through this shit quickly."

He shot a short glance at the door behind, his last chance of escaping, and then ran as fast as he could through the field of glowing creatures. Ahead of him was a line of his fighters all blasting away any enemies that got too close. Along the way, many of Graham's clones were cut down by the quick slicing action of the creatures. But their progress was fast enough to get them to the end without taking too many casualties.

Once at the black void Graham stopped to address his men quickly. "No-one but me gets out of here alive,

understood? And my people must be kept safe, at all cost. Make sure they get out."

They agreed with the same half-assed nod he usually gave when not entirely sure about something. Graham then jumped into the void, leaving the battle behind him and on to wherever Isaac had chosen to retreat to.

Chapter 29

End game – part two

What lay beyond the veil of darkness Isaac had escaped through was unlike anything Graham had seen before. He walked among an endless array of floating bubbles, all hovering around him and far above him too. Each one had the faint sparkle and shape of an entire galaxy within.

He was amazed by what he saw and yet knew it would all be gone once he had finished with the place. Everything Isaac had ever touched had to be torn down and stamped out of existence if they were ever to rid themselves of him.

There was no sign of Isaac anywhere, though, only more bubble galaxies than he could even begin to count. Except something strange was happening to them now. He was unsure if he had actually seen one pop in the corner of his eye or not. It took another couple of them to disappear suddenly for him to be completely sure he had not imagined it. In no particular order, more and more of them began to follow suit.

Something was breaking them apart.

“Do you see what you have done,” Isaac’s voice was still as big and as inhuman as before. But now it moved freely around the space. “You have destroyed the future.”

“Where are you Isaac? Show yourself.”

“You have no right to see me. You are nothing but dirt at my feet, vermin to be killed without mercy. You are no more deserving of the sight of me than you are of your God.”

“If I didn’t know any better I’d say you sound angry.”
Graham was enjoying baiting his foe for the first time.

“My simulations took everything into account. They predicted almost every possible outcome, but this one. Somehow you have beaten the odds, Graham Denehey. Tell me how you did this. How could you have found a way? The

probability that you could do anything to stop me was less than half a percent, yet you have done it."

"I guess you underestimated just how screwed up reality is. It took a totally random event to stop you. None of us knew that what had been done to me could have become this. But here we are." Graham spun around to face the direction he expected the voice to come at him from. "Where are you?"

"I am here, and I am nowhere. Does it hurt?"

The question spurred Graham to check his wound quickly. It was long and deep, and ached like the worse muscle cramp he had ever felt, yet it was still bearable. His injury acted differently to how it would have if he were in his body still. This was a pain he could not really understand fully. He knew he was hurt and that was about all. "I've felt worse," he said, turning again toward the voice as it moved about him.

"Perhaps you should take a seat!" Isaac's voice rapidly approached like an airborne phantom and attacked from the darkness, cutting Graham down his back. In the blink of an eye Isaac was gone again and hovering somewhere nearby.

Graham forced his hand over the new wound and staggered forward. "You coward! Come out and fight me properly."

As before, Isaac struck Graham with a sharp sword-like appendage as he passed silently by. He was cutting his enemy down one tiny scrape at a time; death by a thousand glowing cuts. From the darkness he was succeeding too. Graham could only guess where he would attack from next.

Two more bubbles fizzled away beside Graham as he spun around repeatedly to fend off the invisible enemy flying around him. It prompted him to ask a question of his own. "What are these bubbles?"

"They were my visions of the future. For a time, they were almost perfect. Now they offend me. You may have

changed their outcome for now, but after I restart the simulations they will be right again. When The Twelve succeed in their mission, the future will be mine again."

"Not if we kill you first."

"Do you really believe killing me will end this? You really are a fool, Graham. Defeat me, destroy me, do what you like. Just know that what I have started here today is bigger than any one of us. Even without me there to reap the rewards of my future world, it will come to pass.

"The Twelve will cause your society to collapse in on itself. With their technology working for us they will take control. They will wage wars between nations, start riots across every country. And while you rip yourselves apart, The Twelve will already have begun to claim what is left for themselves."

"We'll stop you," Graham began. "There's nowhere you can hide that we won't f—"

Before Graham could finish his sentence Isaac appeared in a blurry flash and ran straight for him. He moved too fast for Graham to put up any defence against. Soon he was there in front and extending out his razor sharp arm to attack with. All Graham could do to try and stop him was to throw out a bolt of energy in response.

It had been too little too late for Graham, who felt the sword-like weapon pass right through his core and out the other side. He grabbed the sharp edges of the blade and tried to move it away, but it refused to budge.

"I've killed you once already, I can do it again." Isaac now stood so close that he could lean in and whisper this.

Graham gasped for air as the blade moved about inside of him. Every intake only caused it to increase the size of the wound through his middle a little more. The harder he gripped the sharp edges of the weapon the deeper it cut into his glowing palms. His injuries appeared across his body like fissures running through rock, they glowed so strongly.

"When I'm finished with you, I'll go through everyone you have ever loved next. I will wipe your entire family off the face of the Earth. You humans disgust me."

The words reverberated around the inside of Graham's skull as the images of his family dead and bleeding on the ground came to him. Seeing them in his mind's eye with Isaac standing over them and laughing uncontrollably made him insane with rage. He had no intention of giving in that easily, though. Every vision he had of their deaths and the devastation Isaac would cause from that day on, only helped the energy build within his hands.

A heat began to permeate his skin that seemed to be most intense around his fingertips. Something powerful was trying to find a way out, an energy that came from the deepest part of him. It was a reserve of strength he had heard of people finding during moments of incredible difficulty. Now, as he stood holding the sword that had run him through, he could feel it happening to him. This was his one last chance. What he had allowed to build within him would be a once only occurrence.

"What are you doing?" Isaac said. The unexpected brightness shined in his dark eyes.

Eventually it became just too much for Graham's body to contain. First it leapt from his fingers, then it forced its way out of his wounds, before exploding in one giant release. Both Graham and Isaac were sent sliding across the ground as a result of the sudden blast.

Once he had finally come to rest, Graham recoiled back up onto his elbows and searched for Isaac nearby. He found him quickly, hobbling away with his arms clutching his chest. It was obvious where he was going.

"No, stop," Graham called out.

Isaac replied as he escaped. "Goodbye, Graham."

It was too late. Isaac swiftly disappeared into one of the bubble galaxies floating around. The simulations had presented the perfect place to hide. There were thousands,

if not millions of them to choose from. Finding Isaac to finish him off would take an equal amount of people.

That gave Graham an idea.

"Hey, I need help in here." He crawled toward the black void entrance. He made it most of the way, despite his body refusing to cooperate, before two of his clones arrived to help him.

"G, what happened? Where's Isaac?" one of them said.

"He disappeared into his simulations," Graham replied. "You have to find him."

"How, there's too many of them to search."

"Do that splitting thing again. Keep going until there's enough of you to enter every last fucking one. We have to end this now. We can't let him get away."

The other two of him looked to each other and shared a silent moment of consideration. Being of the same mind as the original meant Graham had no doubt what their reply was going to be. When given the chance to protect those he loved he would always take it, whatever the cost to him. This time, at least, he was not the one to make the sacrifice, but his copies.

Both gave a 'what the heck' shrug then chose a bubble to enter and leapt inside. To Graham's surprise more followed soon after. He lay on the ground and watched as an endless army, made up entirely of his clones, ran past and jumped straight into another of Isaac's bubble galaxies.

Within seconds it became clear to him that this was going to go on for some time. There was a very large part of him that suspected Isaac could have created an infinite amount of these bubble galaxies to run his simulations through. That meant what he watched had a chance of going on forever.

He lurched onto his knees, then stumbled to his feet finally. The wounds pulled and tugged at him as he moved. It was to be a slow stagger back through to the other room, where he expected the fight was still raging. All that he

could have done to stop Isaac now had been. His fight was over, and seeing his family again was all that mattered to him.

When he stepped back through the void, minding he did not block the stream of other Grahams running past, he was shocked to see things had changed dramatically. The glowing creatures Isaac had spawned to protect him were much more densely packed into the room than before. An ever increasing collection of Graham's clones had caused a seemingly exponential growth of both. To keep up, the creatures were forming more and more of themselves.

He was approached by a few of his copies, who each took to forming a protective circle around him. "Time for you to leave, G," one of them said to him.

They took him through the fight all the way to the rear exit.

"What about all of you, what happens now?" Graham asked, while watching the chaotic fight continuing behind them.

"Don't worry about us, G, we've got it covered. Problem is we can't stop the fracturing process now; it's got a life of its own. So you need to get the hell out of here, everyone else too."

"What's going to happen then?"

"Ask Luke, when you see him again. Now go, let us finish this."

Before he could argue back, Graham was shoved through the exit and out the other side. He wandered through to the blackened landscape beyond, one he knew all too well already, and made a straight line for the waiting crowd.

Phoenix and Conrad each appeared to have seen some action themselves, as they both had some form of injury. Thankfully nothing serious. But there were more there with them. Friendly faces he recognised instantly, smiling back at him.

"Oh my god, Stephen," he shouted excitedly.

Some of the Sentients had survived the ordeal. Luke was there as well, with his fellow Sentients, and a strained expression on his face.

But Kindness was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Kindness?" Graham asked, suspecting the worst.

Luke lowered his head with a look of obvious remorse.

"No, oh Christ."

Stephen was the first of them to speak again. "Graham, how did you do this?"

"It was you, you made it happen. Don't you see?" Graham replied as he staggered toward them. "The changes you made to me before I left here, with Sentient code, caused it. My mind isn't fractured anymore. Releasing the other versions of me started this process of copy after copy."

"And what about Isaac, is he...?"

"He can't go anywhere. I think he's hurt too. When the other copies of me find him they'll kill him finally."

"But, Graham, there's a problem," Luke said.

Graham looked to a worried Stephen for clarification.

"The fracturing process, it's not stopping," Stephen explained. "The other versions of you told us that they have no control over it. The rate of their growth is unsustainable. But this world is only of a finite size. At some point there will be too many. We can't stay in this place any longer."

"If these other versions of you can't stop this, then it will eventually consume our entire world," Luke added.

"I had to do something. I had no choice. What the hell do we do now then?"

Stephen and Luke shared a knowing glance. "We've come up with an idea, but it's a long shot. Meet us in your world. We'll explain there."

* * *

Graham's eyes fluttered open the moment he pulled the three needles from the back of his head and threw them, and the cable, to the ground. Next to arrive back in the real world was Phoenix, then Conrad. They each rubbed the base of their skulls where the wires had punctured their skin.

They were still in the large office of the Mayor's tower. And the drone attack was still in full swing. Even with Isaac hiding within his own simulation, the army he commanded were hell bent on destruction.

"Luke, you here?" Graham called out as he approached the desk at the front of the room. As he moved he felt a sudden pang in his side, like he had pulled a muscle there.

A second later Luke appeared in front of them. He had chosen to form as a hologram while sitting in Isaac's voluptuous leather chair. "I'm here, Graham. So this is how Isaac could exist in both worlds at the same time. My core essence is here, within these systems, but I can still see my world too. Remarkable."

"That's great to hear, Luke. What about your idea?"

"Is there time?" Phoenix asked immediately after Graham.

Luke stood and walked around to the conference table in the middle of the room. There he began to initiate a connection to the computer system and brought forth layer upon layer of floating, holo-displays. He interacted with them all by waving his arms about at blistering speed, so fast in fact that he appeared to have more than the two arms of before.

"What are you looking for in there?" Graham asked.

"From here Isaac could control his army. I'm looking for anything that could allow me to do the same."

"Wait, you mean you can stop them?"

"That is part of it, yes. The other part is ... Ah, there we are."

"What? Tell us, Luke." Phoenix pulled a chair out of her way and leant against the table.

"The Orbs. When you contacted us through one we were sure it had more to it than just a holographic emitter. Now I realise what they are for. Not only do they allow Isaac to move about the city, they also allow large amounts of data to pass between his army. When he made changes to their programming he would simply upload it to them through the Orb system."

"Like a software upgrade?" Conrad asked.

"No, more like an entire firmware update." Luke continued to talk while his arms zoomed about in front of him. He could access multiple systems at once. "With the creation of a simple program I can make changes of my own."

From nothing came Stephen's image. Soon even more arrived to take up almost the whole front of the room.

"Luke, we must hurry," Stephen said. "We estimate only another few minutes until our world collapses in on itself."

"Is this all there is left?" Graham could count the surviving Sentients on his fingers and toes, there were so few of them now. Predictably, he did not get a reply; the truth was too painful for them to admit. They had been almost completely annihilated, again.

"OK, just give me ... there, got it." Luke then called to Graham, "You need to get everyone away from this building. When our world implodes it will destroy all of the crystal structures with it. All Isaac has created, including the crystal tower inside the stone monument in the centre of this building, will be destroyed. You must go, now!"

"No, not yet. What about you and the others?"

"We have an idea about that too, Graham. Do you remember how many of the MARC corruptions once existed within your relay network?"

"There were probably hundreds of thousands. Why?"

"Because each was roughly a tenth the size of a fully formed Sentient. What does that tell you about your pre-existing relay network?"

Graham quickly realised the point and let out an excited call. "That's genius, Luke."

"What is?" Conrad asked.

"They're going to transfer themselves into the relay network instead. But how?"

"Again, the Orbs," Luke replied, before another flurry of his fast moving arms. "The Conduits were physically connected to the crystal tower that connected to our world. The Orbs are the same, just a wireless version. Using them we hope to leave the Sentient world entirely. But you cannot stay to watch, you have to leave before the tower falls."

"Don't have to tell me again," was Conrad's reply as he led the way.

None of them hung around to test Luke's theory. Graham, Phoenix, Conrad and his two men ran for the lift and punched the button for the ground floor. It set off at speed and within seconds they were leaving the tip of the stone monument far behind. They had left every surviving Sentient behind too. Now it was a race against time for Graham's group to escape the tower and for Luke's people to make their idea a reality.

As the lift whizzed down through the floors, it shook. The whole thing stuttered a few times as the power cut out and then returned a split second later. Cracks then formed in the stone monument that passed them by. The gaps in the stone seemed to be racing their lift to the ground floor.

Then, as the lift pinged to confirm it had arrived, a large chunk of stone landed in front of them. They all turned to look back at the monument to find a bright glass-like shine coming from the hidden tower inside.

"Don't stop, everyone out now," Graham yelled.

Conrad ran with them, but ordered his people as he did. "The building is coming down. Get the hell out of here."

Everyone ran outside as more pieces of stone landed nearby. But they did not stop there and continued to shout out their warning as they ran for the cover of the surrounding buildings. "Keep going, dammit, keep going," they each ordered.

Graham looked behind himself as the rest of the stone case exploded and became airborne. Eventually the entire crystal tower could be seen and it looked to be in a bad way. The tower at Sanctuary had reacted in the same way, he remembered with sudden clarity. He watched it happen yet again. First the tower flickered, then it cracked, until finally it started to split apart entirely.

As the first big chunk of the tower hit the ground it sent a deep rumble through the concrete and whipped up a huge cloud of dust and smog that blasted past Graham's group. The force of it pushed a few of them to the dirty floor and coughing amid a blinding and thick swirl of particulate air.

Phoenix stopped ahead of Graham and rested against a wall while the street filled with debris. She looked at Graham, with a stream of tears coming from her aggravated eyes, and asked him: "Is it over? Did they do it?" she said, wiping her eyes on her sleeves.

"There's no way of knowing for now," he replied. "All we can do is hope they did. Otherwise the entire Sentient race was just killed in that collapse, along with Isaac."

"Wait, Graham, look at your hand."

He did and was shocked to find the diamond device had gone. With the extra voices in his head gone there was no more need for it.

Brigadier Harrington's voice then called out to Graham from the wrist device still around his arm. "Graham, answer me goddammit. Was that you?"

"I think so," Graham shouted, barely breaking through the noise of the collapsing building nearby.

"What the hell did you just do?"

"Why?"

"Because the drones have stopped attacking. They just turned round and flew away. The soldiers too, they've stopped as well. Whatever you did, it worked. It's over. We've won!"

As the Mayor's tower gradually succumbed to the overwhelming force pulling it down toward the ground, it began to lean to the side a little. Being the highest structure within the whole of New Chelmsford meant it could be seen for miles as it then fell. It toppled with a violent crack as it split apart, speeding to the floor ever faster in highly reflective pieces. When it met its ultimate fate it took out many of the closest blocks with it, devastating yet more of the city.

No-one hung around to see, they were already focused on escape. Now, finally the many who had been trapped inside Isaac's shield were free to leave. And for Graham's little group, it was now time to return to their families once more.

Graham vowed, as he fled the area too, that from that day on he would never leave Jane and Alex's side ever again. Not even for a second. He could not bear relying on his memory of their faces alone anymore.

He would see them again soon enough. Just as soon as he had left the city far behind him.

But one question still remained: where were The Twelve?

Chapter 30

Two Weeks Later

Stanley sat in a brightly-lit room with beams of wintery sunshine streaming in through the window. He could see right across the Thames as it washed gracefully past the building a few tens of feet below, his view only occasionally obscured by frost on the window. The soft sofa he had chosen to use as he waited within the dark, polished wood decorated room was beyond comfortable, it was pure bliss for his tired bones, and warm too. He spread an arm out across the back of the sofa and breathed in deep.

On the wall to his right was a large screen, positioned at around the same height as him when standing. He did his best not to concentrate too much on the news broadcast as it played out in near silence. All the news talked about now was the devastation caused to New Chelmsford and how those responsible were somehow still at large. He had not heard anything from Isaac since he made it out of the city.

This worried him greatly.

During the two weeks that had followed his escape of the city Stanley had been a busy man, as too had the rest of The Twelve. Each member had travelled across the country to different airports or shipping docks before heading on to their nation of choice. Stanley had been given the entire northern US to infect with his viral consciousness and then take over finally. But he had always been promised one thing before he was required to head there.

The office he was waiting in was one he had known well in his previous life as a high ranking politician. He had to be here, at this moment, to fulfil his last wish before giving up on his human existence completely. The person who had wronged him, the one who had forced him out of the job he was destined to have had, was soon to return to the place he waited. This person would be unaware Stanley was there. He would be surprised soon enough.

The news report quickly turned to interviews of the poor citizens trapped inside the city of New Chelmsford during the *siege*, as they had put it. He could just about hear the person speaking and it made him frown.

"It was absolute hell on earth," a young woman said as she nervously chewed the sleeve of her denim jacket. "I kept a video log of it all, all three months of it. Do you want to see?"

The reporter cut away before the girl could replay her video recording. "Thank you for taking the time to speak to us, Susan. I expect you've got quite the story."

Stanley sighed as the news ran the same video of the building his Master had resided in as it collapsed. He had seen this clip enough times to be completely unfazed by it now. Knowing that Isaac had possibly been inside when it happened only concerned him a little. His leader was surely not made of anything so fragile as to be destroyed by a simple building implosion? Yet the ongoing silence from Isaac still had him on edge.

Had things gone wrong? He could not be sure. His and the rest of The Twelve's mission forbade them from trying to communicate with anyone. He could not find out the fate of Isaac without risking the entire future he had been shown. It was the future he had come to yearn for, the very future he thought he deserved.

The door to Stanley's left creaked open and a tall, smartly dressed man walked in.

"That's fine, thanks, Jess. Oh, can you let me know when Andy calls, I need to ask him about the budget review," the man said.

Without seeing Stanley at all, the man wandered around to the other side of his desk and took his seat. All the while he kept his eyes locked onto the tablet in his hands. When he finally placed the tablet down and went to activate his holographic display, he spotted someone was in the room with him and jumped almost out of his chair. "What? How did you get in here?" the man began as he swiped his finger across an alarm button on his tablet. The alarm remained silent, ignoring the warning entirely. "Shit."

"Please don't swear at me, Daniel, Mother would be so disappointed." Stanley crossed his legs and sat back in the soft sofa even more.

"What do you want, Stanley?"

"Is that any way to speak to your older brother? I'm here to say goodbye."

"You've done that already, when you fled the city for some backwards town in the country. You don't still hold a grudge do you, just because I got the job and you didn't? Come on, you know you never deserved it."

Stanley ground his teeth together as the insult sank in. "I didn't come here to fight with you again, brother. As I say, I came here to say goodbye."

"Fine, goodbye. Are we done here? I'm not sure if you've seen the news or not, but there's currently a manhunt going on across the country. The bastards that nearly destroyed your little town—"

"New Chelmsford is a city," Stanley cut in to say. "And don't pretend you didn't know that. I was Deputy Mayor of that city, so show some respect."

"OK, anything you say, Stanley. My point is, I don't really have the time for this overdue visit. It's been what, four years since I last saw you? Just say what you've come here to say and then leave. If you're still Deputy Mayor of New

Chelmsford, then they probably need you right now anyway."

With a degree of hesitation Stanley eventually decided to continue. "I'm here because, in a few hours' time, I will have become more than I ever dreamt, more than you could ever be capable of. I have been on a journey of late, which when complete will make me one of the strongest entities on the planet."

"What on Earth are you talking about? Are you insane?"

"I am not insane," Stanley snapped. He took a few slow breaths in before calming enough to go on. "In exchange for my devotion and undying loyalty to my Master I was promised something. He gave me this moment in reward."

"I honestly have no idea what you are talking about, Stanley. Your Master?"

"Isaac."

The name froze Daniel in his seat. "No," he said, his hands gripping the table in front of him.

"Oh yes. You may have beaten me to the job I was promised, yet I will be the one who wins in the end. You and the rest of humanity will bow before my Master and The Twelve. Well," Stanley paused for a second, "you won't."

He stood, swiftly removed a pistol from the back of his trousers, and fired a single silenced shot to the centre of his younger brother's head. The impact of the bullet snapped Daniel's head back against the cushion of his chair. The rest of his body then slumped and became limp.

Stanley smiled to himself as he looked out across the London city scape outside the window. A warm and pleasant rush flowed throughout him. He had succeeded. His brother had now paid for the cowardly deed that had claimed Stanley's career as a city politician. He had earned his place among The Twelve.

Now his attention could turn back to his overall mission. Despite having no idea where Isaac was or whether he was hiding inside the Sentient world again, Stanley had to

continue. The other eleven members of The Twelve were already well on their way to their target locations. He could not delay his next journey for much longer.

He became excited at the prospect of exiting his body again and exploring the technology of an entire nation. It presented an enormous amount of fun for him to figure out all of the different ways he could cause mayhem to an entire society. After enough time had passed and he had enough control over the US, he would get in contact with the others. He looked forward to sharing his success with Isaac, just to see how proud his Master would be. The rest of his life was to be the most rewarding of all of his years.

He placed the gun on the table, made no attempt to wipe his prints off of it, and made for the door. Using his new skills, he could tamper with any equipment he touched, so planned on an unexpected attack of hiss from the receptionist's wrist computer to mask his escape.

Except he only managed to turn the handle a few degrees. Laughing from behind made him turn his head to look back at his brother's body. "What the..." he said in reaction to what he saw.

His brother was alive and laughing hard in his seat. Stanley could not understand what was going on. The blood dripping hole in the centre of Daniel's head was still there; the bullet had blasted through his skull. So what was going on?

"How are you...?" Stanley stopped speaking when he noticed something behind his brother's head. There was another hole in the headrest of Daniels' chair, and then another in the wall behind. "Who are you?"

Suddenly Daniel's image wobbled like a mirage and slowly morphed into another. The face was one that caused an instant reaction from Stanley, who tried to pull the door open. Only it would not move. Someone was keeping it shut from the other side.

"Hello, Stanley," Luke said, his feet resting casually on the table in front of him.

"I don't understand, how are you here?"

"We know everything about you, Stanley. When Isaac ran for his life and hid inside his infinite collection of simulations, we were able to follow him. Well, to be completely honest, Graham did."

"Impossible."

"You have no idea. Anyway, when Graham sent his clones into Isaac's simulations they found out about the identities of each of The Twelve, and then told me. Isaac had included every detail for the sake of his simulation's accuracy. That gave us everything we needed to track you and the others down."

"You really believe you have a chance?"

"Stanley, you're not listening. You are the last one alive. We've already killed the others. This plan of Isaac's is officially over."

"I don't believe you. Besides, you haven't answered my question. How are you here? There are no holographic emitters in this building."

"No, there aren't. But there are plenty of power and data relays though. The world I came from, the Sentient world as you humans called it, is gone, totally destroyed. Isaac was inside when it imploded. To survive outside of that place I used his Orb devices to upload a program to all of his soldiers. They were called to their nearest Orb and then ordered to find a relay close to them - the older ones, not the new ones you and Isaac had built. The program they then passed through the relay network altered them all."

"Are you telling me you and your race of Sentients now live within the old relay network?"

"Indeed I am, Stanley, indeed I am."

Stanley fell back into the soft sofa behind him. "It can't be over. You can't have won."

"You can come and get him now," Luke called to the person just outside the room.

"Wait, what about my brother?"

"He's currently under lockdown. We knew you were coming here to kill him, so we set up a trap to get you."

A group of guards stepped into the room and took a strong position next to Stanley. Neither of them approached any closer as someone else there was required to instead. A third man walked in after them and stood in between.

"Hello Stanley?"

"Conrad." Stanley gave one quick look. "What will you do with me now?"

"Unfortunately for you, there's only one option." Conrad walked over to the table and picked up the silenced pistol. He looked it over with a fierce grin across his face as he slowly took aim.

"Please, no, you can't do this. I have rights."

"Rights? You have a bloody cheek, Stanley. You turned your back on your own species. There's no coming back from that."

"But I had no choice, Isaac forced me to do it."

Conrad lowered his weapon and sighed aloud. "No, you always had a choice, and you chose Isaac."

As it quickly dawned on him that he was out of options, Stanley then became angered. "Fine. Do what you have to. I've a feeling this will be a heavy weight on your conscience anyway. Perhaps that will be my legacy. Yes, I expect—"

Without any further hesitation, Conrad raised the pistol and pulled the trigger, knocking Stanley straight out of his chair and landing face down on the carpet. "I doubt it," he said, before dropping the gun to the ground and walking out the room finally.

Luke then stood and looked down at Stanley's fidgeting body. "What a complete and utter twat," he said. After that he looked to the guards still there with him. "Did I say it right?"

"Yep, just like a human," one of them replied.

Epilogue

10 years later

It was a strong wind that tussled with the leaves hanging above the heads of Graham's family gathering in the park. A warm summer sun beat down upon them too. It was getting on now and would be turning evening soon. Yet despite the fast setting sun, sitting on a blanket on the grass was everyone Graham loved. None of them had any intention of leaving just yet. They had more of the day to saviour.

"Think we should start packing everything away?" Jane asked Graham with a gentle kiss on his cheek.

He looked up to the top of the tree beside him and allowed the breeze to flow across his face. "Nah, give it a little longer," he said, before turning to Elliot and Ruth. "How's Lewis getting on at school?"

"Yeah, he's doing well. He loves his football," Elliot replied as he took a bite of the chocolate bar in his hand. "He's taking after his old dad."

The silence that followed was the most comfortable of moments. They were all so happy in each other's company that words often got in the way.

A pair of teenage girls wandered across the field toward Graham and his family. The large, bouncy style of Alex's hair had still never ceased in its endeavour to remain big. But now she was seventeen she had taken to tying it back, just like her mother, Jane, always did. She still copied her mother at times. Graham never tired of noticing this.

"Hey, you two, what you up to?" he called across to Alex and her friend.

"Nothing Dad," she replied, a roll of her eyes in return.
"Me and Friendship were just talking about boys again."

Graham rolled his eyes back at them.

"You did ask, G," Elliot said with a smile.

Ruth leant into Elliot and squeezed him tight. "I need to go in a bit, babe. I promised I'd pick Lewis up from Phoenix and Rhys around seven. They're little one goes to bed around seven-thirty."

"Fine. I'll come too, if you want."

"No, that's OK, you and Graham can be together longer. I know you both miss each other terribly when you're apart."

"Funny, sis," Graham snorted back.

"Oh, Friendship," Ruth said to Alex's somewhat shy friend.

"Yes, aunt of Alex," the young girl responded.

"Can you tell Luke to remember it's his turn to do the speech at this year's anniversary."

"I still can't believe that all happened ten years ago now." Graham pulled Jane close. "Isaac nearly destroyed us all. It feels like it only happened a short while ago."

"I will pass on your message, aunt of Alex." Friendship suddenly faded away into thin air a moment later.

"Oh, I didn't mean right now..." Ruth tried to say to stop the shy Sentient girl from leaving so soon. "Sorry, Alex."

Alex laughed. "Don't worry about it, Aunty Ruth. Friendship is still getting used to talking to us."

"I wish more of them would try. We're not that scary are we, humans I mean?" Jane reached out her hand to pull Alex into her and Graham's cuddle. When Alex refused with a 'seriously' look, Jane forced her. "It's only a cuddle with your mum, for god's sake. Anyone would think I was horrible to you."

"I guess it's going to take time for them to build up the confidence. They're all around us, twenty-four hours a day, inside the relay network, so it's not like they don't understand what we're like." Graham added. "Luke always said the other Sentients were nervous of interacting with us when he and Stephen were still living at Sanctuary."

"Friendship says a lot of the younger Sentients are interested in mixing with us more," Alex said as she wriggled in her mother's tight grip. "The older ones are just cautious because of everything they went through."

The group again became quiet and enjoyed their company in silence.

Graham looked across the park. There were families packing up and heading away from the area. But a few others were determined to soak up as much sun as possible before they left - the same as his own group. It amazed him to see so many people out and about so close to the evening. It was even more impressive to consider something else; there was a very real possibility that a few of those in the park were Sentients. As Friendship had shown him, it was hard to tell them apart from looks alone.

What warmed his heart as he smiled at each member of his own family, was the knowledge that they were all safe. *Captain Rigs was right when he said we would all live normal lives after Isaac was gone*, he thought. In fact, it was the absolute truth. In spite of everything Isaac had done, and all of the people that had died because of him, life had returned to normal again. The legacy Isaac had eventually left was that of happy and content lives. He had failed to break the human spirit. And he had failed to break Graham's family in two.

Now with the Sentients living inside the relay network and existing so close to humanity, life had become so ordinary. And the future only promised to be better. The best of both species were working for a common goal; the improvement of life for all, whether human or Sentient.

Graham breathed in a lung full of air and released it slowly. "I might see if the two Stephens fancy another game of holo-tennis," he said, hinting to Elliot.

"I'm not sure we can take another beating from those two. They know each other too well."

A chuckle flowed gracefully from Graham's mouth. Over the course of the last ten years the Sentient Stephen had helped the human Stephen a great deal. Now they were both a force to be reckoned with on any intellectual level. More importantly for Graham they were also a formidable team when it came to tennis.

Even chasing a holographic tennis ball could cause Graham to sweat profusely.

"Fine, you two go then," Jane said as she began to tidy away their picnic.

"Awesome." Graham got to his feet and stretched his back. "You ready?"

Elliot nodded while he stuffed another last snack into his mouth. "You bet."

This time Graham was determined to beat the two Stephens, or he would just cheat by tinkering with the holo-emitters on the court. Either that or he would unleash Phoenix upon them both.

Life was good now. It was really good.

THE END

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Thanks for reading The Sentient Corruption!

I hope you enjoyed the trilogy. If you did then why not leave a review on Amazon and share your experience with others.

Thanks again :)

Ian Williams

About the author



Ian Williams is a Science Fiction writer from the UK. He lives in a small town roughly 50 miles outside of London.

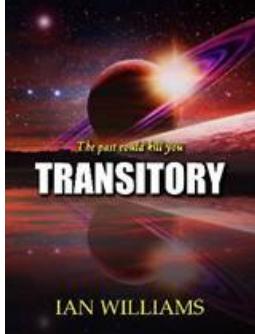
Although born in Barking, Ian was raised in a town in Essex called Danbury. Until the age of eleven he was an ordinary child with nothing extraordinary or particularly different about him. This changed when he was diagnosed with Becker's Muscular Dystrophy just before starting secondary school. This condition only affects around 2400 boys in the UK, making it a rather rare one.

After finishing school and sixth form, Ian went on to a career in the UK Court Service. He spent seven years working there, but had also begun to write as a hobby. When that became his everyday routine he found himself lost in a world of infinite possibilities, never able to accept just one outcome of many. In the end he chose to ride the tide of time and allowed the future to be an unknown space, where only the stories he lives can ever alter that timeline.

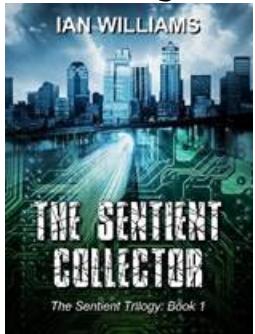
Sorry, I think I lost myself there for a moment. Anyway, Ian is now writing as much as his fingers will allow, or until his keyboard decides to explode from all the typing.

Other books by Ian Williams

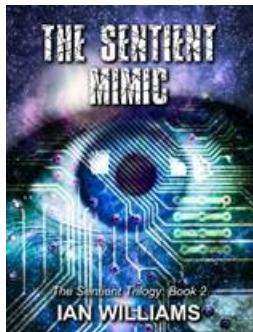
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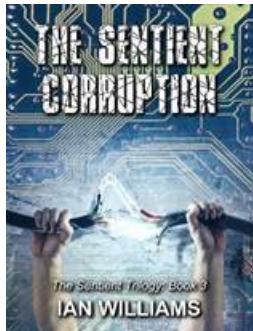
2. The Sentient Collector (released January 2015)



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